DANCING WITH THE *Devil*

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PART 1

'Be sober, be vigilant; because your adversary the devil, as a roaring lion, walketh about, seeking whom he may devour' Peter 5:8

CHAPTER 1

SAYING GOODBYE

They say time is the best cure for healing the heart – I didn't believe that.

For me, time was my greatest enemy; minutes kept crawling, days never seemed to end, and the healing relief everyone had talked about appeared to be a myth, a merciful delusion that would never come.

When I learned what had happened to him, it felt like I'd been robbed, beaten, bruised, and left on the side of the road. It was then that this deep, dark hole first started to grow in my chest, and as it grew, so did the numbness in my soul.

Two weeks later, standing in the cemetery, surrounded by all his family and friends, I still felt naked and was struggling to breathe. Trembling like a fallen leaf in the storm. Staring at my shiny black shoes, I wished I was dreaming, still unable to believe he was gone; that a young life had so abruptly ended.

Once I'd mustered up the courage to lift my head, my eyes wandered along the rows of dark shadows, still in search of just one young, familiar face, someone with a reassuring smile who'd tell me it was all just a bad dream… But overnight, those faces had aged almost unrecognisably, and all I could see were the blank expressions of tired old men. I dropped my head, but too late. Swollen, bloodshot eyes – they would haunt me forever.

The hot breeze whistling around the graveyard had transformed into a scorching wind by the time the reverend began addressing the crowd, and every time he paused, the wind carried around the terrifying sound of silence.

I shuddered as a pained, long sigh and sniffle sounded behind me. Soon followed by another sigh and more sniffles… Then the angry sky let out a grumble and started to cry too. Its slow teardrops hit the ground hard, and whenever I heard more deep exhales and sniffles, I could picture similar fat teardrops rolling down on those pale cheeks I'd seen.

Lightning flashed, accompanied by another clash of thunder interrupting the minister's speech, and my mind and body froze. Despite standing only twenty yards away, his words had failed to reach me anyway, but I could hear something else loud and clear: the endless echo of fast teardrops, a sigh, teardrops, a s i g h, t e a r d r o p s—

E N O U G H!

I tried to shield my ears, but my hands refused to obey me.

Please stop crying; please stop torturing me.

But the weeps and sighs just went on and on…

Maybe I should leave quietly. Would anyone notice at all if I weren't here?

NOW! RUN! While no one's watching, just run away from them. GO! Silly girl, go! What are you waiting for?

Unable to move, I watched the pale grass swaying around my feet.

Suddenly, the wind freed a strand of hair from the tight bun that swirled up at the back of my neck and made it soar. I watched it waltzing in the wind, admiring the smooth circling movements, until strong arms grabbed me from both sides to drag me away. Too weak to resist, I turned my head back to cast a last glance at the remains of my happiness. The dark crowd had scattered into blurry forms, leaving the previously busy spot barren, with only a heap of disturbed earth behind.

Then, I found myself in the back seat of a car. When the engine roared, the realisation at last came to me: this was the day of our final goodbye, the day I would always remember.

Today, 26 August 2009, we'd buried my love, *Henry*.

CHAPTER 2

A/WAKE

When I came to my senses, the familiar musky scent of pine and citrus filled my nostrils. He must have gotten up early and, after taking a shower, come back to say goodbye before leaving for work. Like he always did. Without opening my eyes, I could clearly picture him lying beside me, perhaps browsing the news on his phone.

His weight suddenly shifted on the bed, turning towards me – sensing I was waking – his fingers ready to let go of the phone and caress my face instead.

'Just a couple more minutes,' I said, reaching for his hand. My lips curved into a smile at the prospect of starting another day *together*.

But my smile quickly faded. And when I opened my eyes, the sense of emptiness punched me hard in the chest again.

The last thing I remembered was sitting in his family's living room. *Was it yesterday or a lifetime ago?* The spacious room had shrunk to a tight cage, and although I, the wild animal, had been toying with hundreds of different scenarios to break out of that prison, in the end, I didn't. I couldn't.

Trying to draw away from his parents, I'd squeezed myself to the other end of the L-shaped sofa. Still his mother's crying penetrated every corner of my mind. And that lifeless look on his father's face when trying to comfort her? *I will never forget. How can I ever forget?*

I remembered seeing his brother, Timothy, there too – though, at first, I didn't recognise him. He was leaning against

the doorframe leading to the dining room; arms crossed, his once rosy cheeks ashen and wet. My stomach twisted as our eyes met for just a split second.

What have I done to them?

Flashbacks of faceless people came back to me, offering me tea and cakes. I'd only accepted a cup so that they'd stop bothering me. The tea burned my tongue and tasted like acid.

While the adults were chatting away over some snacks, children were chasing each other through the crowded rooms giggling. '*I'll catch you*,' shouted a little boy. So innocent, so carefree. As I watched them, the bitter taste started circulating in my mouth again, this time from the back of my throat.

And those gentle pats on my shoulder – just thinking of them raised all the hairs on my skin again. The only thing I despised more than the shoulder pats were those pitying glances and careful whispers following me everywhere, discussing me as if I weren't just a few feet away. '*Poor girl, what a shock it must have been for her. Do you think she's alright now? She looks so pale; she might faint at any minute. Maybe someone should call a doctor*…'

To break away from the sidelong glances, I fixed my eyes on the large fan chandelier in the middle of the square ceiling. It was another hot day, and the swift blades kept propelling the humid air around the room. With each blast, the humming of the machine seemed to grow louder and louder, until the only noise in the room was the fan. The blades were hypnotising me, and my head began to feel heavy.

Eventually, the circles slowed down until the fan almost stopped – then suddenly the whole room was spinning, forcing me to close my eyes. The acidic taste intensified in my mouth. My fists clenched. With every nerve, I fought the urge to ruin the beige carpet. I swallowed hard and pressed my teeth together with such force that they nearly cracked. All my muscles tightened like overstretched guitar strings about to snap, and I grasped the teacup firmly. I heard the sound of cracking china, and my fingers felt wet, but the tension in my body had finally eased.

'Liz, you alright, my love? You've got tea all over your clothes.

Nah, give me your hand, and I'll help you to the bathroom.'

Bright-red nails and claw-like fingers were the first things I saw when I opened my eyes. Then I caught a blurry glimpse of her face, but all I could make out was a long nose and close-set eyes, the very features that had once made another face beautiful; on hers, they looked like a messy composition of rushed brushstrokes.

Her long, dyed-black curls flapped as she looked at my legs. I followed her gaze. The cup's handle was loosely hanging on my index finger while the rest of the china lay in my lap.

'Just be careful – you'll cut yourself,' she told me then called out to someone to get her a dustpan and brush from the kitchen.

I recognised the high-pitched voice as belonging to his aunt Marjorie. The claw-like fingers were still reaching out to me, but I quickly swept the bits off my lap and rushed out to the hallway, then up into the bathroom. Having locked the door behind me, I kneeled beside the toilet and threw my head over the bowl, but I produced nothing. The feeling of nausea came in short, intense waves. I waited and cleared my throat but still nothing.

I splashed some water on my face from the basin then drank a little to give it another try. This time, I managed to squeeze out a tiny globule of brownish spit. My throat was tingling; it felt like raw meat, and I began to cough.

I swallowed some more water to make another attempt but again with little success. Exhausted, I sat with my back against the cool bath panel and tried to recall when I'd last eaten, but I couldn't remember.

When the stairs let out a creak under approaching footsteps, I shivered. A firm knock sounded on the door.

'Sweetheart, are you okay in there?'

It was his aunt's voice again. I don't know how many times she'd repeated the same question before I replied with, 'I'm fine,' and she finally went away. But I wasn't left entirely alone. The laughing and chatting voices still filtered up from downstairs. I wished I didn't have to go back among *them*. I'd have given anything if, instead, I could have been lying in the coffin we'd just buried.

*

The first rays of sunlight were filtering through the blinds, bringing me back to the present. I didn't need to look around. Even in my dreams, I could have named all the neatly arranged books, CDs, and DVDs fighting each other for space on the rows of tall shelves. I knew the exact place of each childhood memory and photo frame carefully positioned in the room, though their number was countless, and they were everywhere – he was still everywhere.

I can't stay here.

Crawling out of bed – *his old bed* – and heading for the door, I picked up my shoes and little black bag from the floor. I didn't need to dress; I'd fallen asleep and been carried to bed – likely by his father – so I was still wearing my clothes from the day before. Trying not to make a noise, I turned the copper door handle. Then, very slowly, I padded along the dark corridor, tiptoeing past his brother's and parents' bedrooms. I listened carefully, and when I was sure there was no noise from those rooms, I descended the stairs like a ghost.

Outside, the chill dawn greeted me. The soft mist was dissolving as the glowing sun painted the sky in burning colours – a hundred different oranges, pinks, and purples melting on an enormous canvas.

How he loved the sunrise.

I took a couple of steps, but I didn't recognise where I was. Something had changed about the familiar buildings and the way the old lamp posts framed the roads; even the pavement under my feet sloped at an unusual angle.

Drawing my thin cardigan tightly around me, I aimlessly wandered the deserted streets. Silence was my only companion until I somehow made it to an underground station. Holding on to the railing, I staggered down to the open-air platform. I wavered as a current of air lifted my skirt, and I found myself standing at the very edge of the platform.

Listening to the rails coming to life, I closed my eyes. The cool breeze blowing from the tunnel kissed my face invitingly.

Soon, the clamour of the waiting passengers suppressed the noise of the approaching train in my ears. When those sounds had reached maximum volume in my head, my brain began to separate them from each other one by one, just like a radio being tuned to different channels one after the other, with some overlapping interference. Chewing gum bursting, a man turning a newspaper page, a woman laughing, a young child crying, a couple arguing. Echoing back from the inside of my skull, these sounds repeated endlessly in my head. When they abruptly stopped, I opened my eyes, and there he was, only inches away, levitating above the tracks, reaching out his hand to me. He looked as perfect as when I'd first seen him.

'You don't have to wait long now. I'm coming.' I stretched my fingers towards him, and he smiled back at me. As if he'd forgiven me…

I turned my head towards the tunnel. Two shiny eyes were staring back at me menacingly: *the eyes of the beast coming for me*. They grew larger until the shape of the long snake became distinct in the darkness.

I leaned forward, bending my knees.

The monster went on hissing, only seconds away.

Just one more step…

And then it happened. My pulse sped up, and goosebumps spread all over my body from where the electric shock had struck me, jolting me backwards. My hands reached out, trying to grab a pillar to prevent me from falling back on the concrete floor. In the end, I managed to keep my balance, but I was left gasping for air, unable to breathe.

I rubbed my eyes, the words I'd heard when the electric shock hit me still ringing in my ears as a pleasant warmth began to overwhelm my shaking body, leaving no place for confusion or anger. I turned to see the source of the voice, but everyone had boarded the train, and the platform behind me was completely empty.

CHAPTER 3

A JOURNEY TO REMEMBER

'Think it over.'

Only three words. That was what the person – whoever it was – had whispered to me in that final second. Though it wasn't exactly a whisper; more like a faint voice coming from a great distance, yet somehow from very close at the same time. It reminded me of when Henry would stand behind me, folding his arms around me, kissing me lightly on the neck, and whispering in my ear how beautiful I was – and every time he said it, he almost made me believe it was true.

I must have imagined it, but as I heard the words, a yellowish glow had flickered in my reflection on the side of the train as it pulled into the station.

The doors were still open in front of me, and I stepped into the carriage without thinking and collapsed into the nearest seat, still disorientated and under that strange spell. As the dollhouse-like cottages rushed by, a question rose at the back of my mind, and being unable to find the answer almost killed me.

Is this the same carriage where I fell in love for the first time?

*

Jules' deep husky voice has kept me awake, but now, after changing trains at Westminster, her head slowly slides down my shoulder. Looking at her dark cascade of hair, I can't help smiling. Who would have thought this animated girl would

tire sooner than me after rampaging at a rock concert for two hours? The temptation to pinch her awake is almost irresistible. I know I'm being selfish, but the sight of my sleeping friend makes me yawn too – and I don't want to fall asleep. I can't. Not yet. I must enjoy each moment of my freedom, which will last for another half hour or so, according to my phone screen.

My father, of course, doesn't know I'm with Jules. How could I tell him something like this? He never lets me go anywhere – homework and chores are all I'm allowed to do. If I'm not home by half three, right after school, my mobile starts buzzing straight away. (Dad bought me the phone for my thirteenth birthday, but it was, in fact, a present for himself and just another punishment for me: it helps him spy on me *all* the time.)

I envy Jules. She's never in a hurry or being rushed. Even if she didn't get home by dinner, Mrs Kastro wouldn't panic. Everyone knows that Jules is more than capable of taking care of herself. I've known this myself since the incident with Jimmy Doyle in year five.

Poor Jimmy. He'd been slipping banana skins into my bag every day for a week. Jules stood up for me and told him to stop, but he only sealed his fate when he mockingly called her 'Julia'. On the fifth day of banana slipping, Jules turned towards Jimmy who was sitting behind him. The next second his chair fell over backwards, and he ended up lying on the floor groaning with a black bruise under his eye. It all happened very fast, but I don't think I'll ever forget that day – and I'm sure neither will Jimmy. After that, Jules and I became inseparable, and there were no more banana skins slipped into my bag, and no one in our class ever attempted to call her Julia again.

Jules believes my father changed his mind about letting me go to the concert. I may have implied it, but technically I didn't lie – I never actually said one way or the other. She didn't need to know the truth; I didn't want her to worry. She'd have tried to persuade me to stay at home, using clichés I've heard a million times before, like 'you should listen to him; after all,

he's your father', every time putting the emphasis on the word 'father'. And then I'd have a real reason to feel guilty – guilty for *not* listening to her.

Jules and I are like two single gloves making up a pair, her without a father and me without a mother. We both lost a parent unexpectedly early, though for very different reasons. A fatal heart attack took her dad when she was eleven, and my mother left us by choice, overdosing herself on medication when I was nine. I guess, like me, she'd have given anything to spend just one more day with the parent she lost.

I can't recall the last time Dad looked me straight in the eye. Since my mother died, he doesn't only avoid eye contact, he won't come within arm's reach of me. In fact, he prefers not to look at me at all. As if it might burn his eyes. Or as if I were suffering from a shameful disease that would disgust him… as if I were a *leper*.

It was easy to sneak out of the house; I knew Dad wouldn't be home. Every Friday evening is the same for us. We have dinner around seven, and the loudest noise in the dining room is usually our forks and knives sliding across the plates. The meals are okay; never great though – my father's culinary knowledge and skills are limited, and so are mine. After dinner, he puts on his coat and grabs his walking stick. 'Do some homework, and er… don't stay up late. And please don't leave stains on the plates… again,' he mutters, and even the kitchen cupboards shake when the door slams behind him.

I don't follow him anymore. I don't need to. I know exactly where he heads. When he's passed out, it's usually Bald Bob, the owner of the pub on the corner, who carries him home. Bob used to call my brother to come and get Dad, but now Will's away at university. He rarely comes home even for the weekend, and I can't blame him for that. I can't say I miss Will putting a slug in my packed lunch, or me waking up to finding him leaning over me with a razor trying to shave off my eyebrows… though the house does feel empty without him.

Bob used to bring my father home around 2 a.m. But now they're back long before midnight. I should be pleased about

this because I no longer need to listen out for the ringing of the doorbell in the middle of the night. However, the only reason I can think of for them being back so early is that the shot-to-beer ratio must have increased lately. My father says he can handle alcohol, but the spirits work their magic very fast on him.

Tonight, I've hidden my key in the gas-meter box on the side of the house. I told Bob about it yesterday – making a quick detour on the way home after school – I just hope he'll remember. I don't like to leave keys outside the house because any slightly clued-up robber can guess where they might be – under plant pots, under the doormat, and so on – but I did feel a bit proud for coming up with the idea of leaving it in the gas-meter box. Not that our house would be worth breaking into.

I hope Bob will remember to put the key back there as we agreed, so I won't get locked out. I expect to find my father dumped on the living-room sofa as usual.

I sweep some of Jules' hair from her smiling face so that she can breathe easier. She's as peaceful as a sleeping baby. Despite being dressed all in black with heavy metal-plated boots covering her slim legs, she seems so fragile and vulnerable now – something she's definitely not. I wonder what she might be dreaming about…

Careful not to move my shoulder, I turn my head to recheck the time. Still twenty-seven minutes to go. My gaze rests on the floor, and my eyes feel heavy. Here comes a tunnel, and darkness fills the cold air.

I shudder as my eyes pop wide open. My phone screen informs me that another two minutes have passed unnoticed. I must stay awake; I can't miss our station and get Jules into trouble too. Though her curfew is much more flexible than mine, I know even Mrs Kastro would eventually get distressed if her daughter didn't make it back home before midnight.

A mental slap on the face – this is all I need now. *Don't you dare fall asleep. Find something to do. You must stay awake*.

And just as I'm about to drift off again, a painfully harsh wake-up call sounds. The ear-piercing cackling comes from three blondes on my left. They look almost identical. Early twenties or late thirties? I give up guessing – who knows what lies under the thick layer of make-up? They're standing, holding on to a pole, although there are plenty of empty seats, their thighs barely covered by the glittery dresses that fall loosely over their wide hips but tighten upwards, pushing up their sizeable breasts. Their feet have been forced into platform heels, which makes bluish veins bulge on their skin, no tights in sight. A shiver runs through me under my padded denim jacket.

Halfway between the laughing women and me, there's a young couple kissing. The girl has ebony skin and long dark hair which covers the boy's face. Their lips don't part even for a second. Watching them makes me even sleepier, so I decide to study a girl facing them instead.

If I believed in aliens, I'd think she's definitely one. She's truly spectacular; I've never seen anything like her. Her shoulder-length hair is cut asymmetrically and is bright peachy pink; it dazzles my eyes. Her skin is paler than mine, which is rare to see, and her dark-pink eyebrows, ears, and mouth are all covered in piercings – I bet there are more holes in her face than holes for the shoelaces in Jules' knee-high boots. She's wearing neon-green chunky ankle boots and a tutu the same colour as her hair, maybe a touch lighter. Her eyes focus on the kissing couple without blinking, her head nodding at them every other second. I notice a thin black cable running from under her hair to a portable CD player clutched in her hands.

Her head suddenly stops and turns towards me. I swallow hard as she holds my gaze for a long second with her neon-yellow cat eyes. She sticks out her tongue, revealing another piece of silver-coloured metal jewellery.

I'd quickly turn towards the other end of the carriage, but Jules' head, like a barricade, lies in my way. It's probably best anyway, as I get a whiff of both sickness and beer from that direction.

So now there's only one person left to look at: a boy sitting almost opposite me. He seems pretty normal compared to the other passengers in the carriage. I don't recall him sitting there a few minutes ago; he must have just jumped on the train. He's probably a couple of years older than me. A grey backpack rests on the seat next to him, and he holds a book with a red cover in his right hand. *Charlotte? No, that can't be the title!* But the letters are too blurry to decipher.

White trainers? In this weather? I start to question whether my first instinct about him was correct. It's been raining so heavily the past few days that I had to dig out my poor old wellies from my storage cupboard this morning.

As for his clothes, he wears a pair of faded jeans and a tan-coloured leather jacket with a light grey T-shirt underneath. The jacket is like the book in his hand: battered and torn in some places. It doesn't seem to bother him though.

If they were my clothes, I wouldn't care either. Fashion is the least of my worries, because my father never gives me any money to 'waste' on things like new clothes, especially branded ones. I bet he thinks Primark should be the only store in the world (or at least in the part of London where we live).

I only sometimes wish I had some trendy new clothes from the posh shops on the high street. Then maybe the popular girls from school would stop picking on me. Jules keeps telling me to ignore them, but I just can't get their mocking voices out of my head:

'Look at that awful fringe – I bet it's her crippled father who cuts her hair.'

'Look, there she goes, Little Red Riding Hood with her Satanist friend.'

'Look at her dress – even my grandma wouldn't wear such an ugly thing.'

And so on.

The train stops at another station, and the boy leans forward, lowering the hand that's holding his book. On his T-shirt, two letters become visible – an 'I' and an 'L' – and the contours of

an electric guitar. Is he coming from the same concert as us? My mind storms through tonight's events, but I can't remember seeing him there or on the previous train. Of course, tens of thousands of us were singing along with the band in the arena, and he might have changed at different stations. How could I forget a face like that?

As I watch the short curls framing his forehead, the taste of acacia honey touches my tongue. And his eyes – I wonder what colour they are. *Brown or dark blue perhaps?* In the artificial light of the train, it's so hard to tell. A long, slightly turned-up nose divides his oval-shaped face. His rosy cheeks seem so lively despite the late hour, and a kind smile hovers over his lips as he parts then closes them.

'I said, hi. I'm Henry. What's your name?'

I must be exhausted because it takes me a second to process that he's now looking directly at me, and his words are addressed to me.

'My name is…' I mean to say, but the words only form in my head. I open my mouth to speak, but my tongue just won't move.

I try again but nothing, not even a sigh. I can feel beads of sweat collecting on my forehead. A girl who's forgotten her own name, he must think. We stare at each other in silence for what feels like an eternity.

'Elizabeth.' My tongue unexpectedly breaks free, spitting out the word. But my voice sounds so weak and distant, as if it were a stranger's.

I clear my throat before repeating it louder to ensure he's heard it. 'It's actually Elizabeth Jane. But most people just call me Liz or Lizzie. My mum was a huge fan of *Pride and Prejudice*. I mean, *huuuge* fan. She had five different copies of it. Yeah, I know what you're thinking. Five copies of the same novel, huh? What's the point of having five copies of the exact same novel when you can only read one at a time? Believe me, I never understood either. She had a few weird things I never understood.' I murmur the last bit to myself only.

'First, we had the film version on VHS, then she bought the DVD when it came out. My brother and I had to watch it several times when we were little. Don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining; I really liked it. The Colin Firth version of course – not the Keira Knightley one. How could the whole love story of Miss Bennet and Mr Darcy be condensed into two hours? Sounds ridiculous, doesn't it? Anyway, she had only one copy of the DVD. *Thank God*. The very idea of having five copies of the same film, too, would be insane, don't you think?'

I pause to take a breath before I continue. 'I was named after Elizabeth Bennet; not sure where "Jane" comes from though, whether it's after Elizabeth's sister or the writer's name.'

When I finish, my mouth feels as dry as a bone. My hand slides under the flap of my bag in search of my water bottle. But now isn't the right time to have a sip; maybe a bit later, when he's stopped watching me.

Suddenly it feels boiling in the carriage; I wish I could open a window. Was I really talking about my mother and lecturing him on *Pride and Prejudice* a minute ago? Oh gosh, could this be any worse? *Somebody shoot me please. Why is he still staring at me?*

'Sorry, that was a little bit too much information,' I say, trying to avoid his look.

'I agree.'

Great! I've done it again. I've made a complete fool of myself. Why can't I just shut up? I wish I could go back in time. Just three minutes. I'd only say 'Elizabeth'. No more. Elizabeth is the perfect answer. Straight to the point. Why would he care about my mother and her stupid Jane Austen addiction? It has no importance whatsoever – not even for me. Why did I even mention it? Maybe I shouldn't have said a word, not even my name. Maybe I should have just smiled and remained the silent, mysterious stranger on the train. They say guys tend to find girls more attractive if they don't talk but just smile a lot. As if they know all the great secrets in the world but have decided to keep them to themselves. Just like the Mona Lisa. *Why can't I be like the Mona Lisa?*

'I'm sorry. I always talk too much when I'm tired or nervous. Just can't help it.'

'The one with Colin Firth is much better,' he says, and the heavy load lifts from my chest in an instant, but I pretend to be busy studying my wellies. The yellow dots seem darker than usual; they definitely need a good clean tomorrow.

'So which one are you?' he asks.

''Scuse me?'

'Tired or nervous?'

'Erm… bit of both, I guess.'

Silence again – *awkward*.

I'm unsure how much time passes, but it seems enough for him to give up being interested in a silly girl like me. After a long wait, the train finally starts again, and he's back to being lost in his book. I can finally decipher the letters of the title.

'You can't be reading about a girl.' I freeze as the words slip out of my mouth. I should listen to my father and count to five before I say anything.

I quickly cover my lips with my hand, but it's too late. His head is already up, his penetrating gaze fixed on me again. I realise the giggling blondes must have finished their journey, as the carriage is dead quiet apart from the click and rattle of the train, which still isn't loud enough to have suppressed my voice.

Henry closes the book but keeps his index finger between the pages. 'Why not?'

'Because you're a boy?'

'Yep, I'm a boy. Glad we're clear on that point,' he says then pulls his eyebrows together. 'I take it you haven't read *Christine* then.'

His words sound accusatory.

'Should I have? Is she that interesting?'

He starts to chuckle, making me squirm in my seat, and then the chuckle turns into a peal of soft laughter, and I quickly shield Jules' ear with my hand.

'I'm sorry,' he says, lowering his voice.

I'm not sure if he's apologising for laughing at me or almost waking up my friend.

'Well, she's certainly no ordinary girl. It was written by Stephen King,' he adds, and I nod – of course I've heard that name before.

Silence falls between us again, and soon he returns to his book while I carry on rolling up Jules' hair. My fingers draw dark circles in the air until the circles shrink into one tiny black dot.

Suddenly, the carriage rocks around me as if in an earthquake. My body stiffens, and my eyes snap open. I've drifted off again. I slap myself again, this time for real. My burning cheek sobers me up. In my dream, there was this cute boy on the train. He was trying to talk to me, and I managed to scare him off.

I look up and let out an 'oh' in surprise. It wasn't a dream after all. And if the boy hadn't already thought I was crazy, he must be sure of it now after witnessing me slapping my own face.

I decide to keep my head down, but a book with a red cover creeps into view.

'Here. Take it please. I've read it before.'

Why is he giving this to me? I hesitate briefly before reluctantly closing my fingers around the torn covers.

'Don't worry; just lending it,' he says as if reading my thoughts. 'Sorry, but I have to go now. I hope you'll enjoy it. Bye… Elizabeth.' There's a long pause preceding my name, making it sound like something special.

'*Wait*. How can I get it back to you?'

'I'm sure you'll find a way.'

Henry turns back, locking his eyes with mine before the doors open. As he stands there, I finally get an answer to my question. *Hazel, his eyes are hazel*.

'It was a pleasure meeting you…' Again he pauses before he adds, 'Elizabeth.'

'Wait,' I shout, but he's gone. I look at the book, puzzled, trying to find out what he meant about me finding a way.

Meanwhile, Jules' head shifts on my shoulder, accompanied by a short yawn and a low murmur only audible to me.

'Nope, a couple more stations – just sleep on,' I say, stroking her hair again while I look back at the door, now closed.

I'm positive my dream has been much more wonderful than hers.

CHAPTER 4

A MESSAGE FROM HEAVEN

I couldn't breathe. The train was suffocating me. My lungs had shrunk to pea size under my ribcage. I wasn't sure if I could hold on until the next station. I'd only experienced a similar feeling once, years ago when Mum was still alive.

We were spending Christmas in a lodge in the mountains, up in Scotland. There was a loch nearby. Dad had warned me not to step on its frozen surface, but I wouldn't listen. I was racing Will to the lodge. I wanted to beat him, but he was a long way ahead of me, so I took a shortcut. By the time I heard the cracking noise, it was too late; the dark hole swallowed me instantly.

Under the ice shield, ghostly forms merged into one another. I was frightened. I didn't know how much time I'd spent down there before I spotted the light from above. I swam towards the arms reaching for me through the hole as if pushed by an extraordinary force from below. When the arms grabbed me, I saw my mother's face—

I need to get out. I need air. Nausea rolled in my belly, and I struggled to get up. Setting my teeth, I dragged myself towards the nearest door, managed to locate the emergency alarm, and reached out to free the flap. But I had to pause. *Why are there five buttons? Which one is the right one?*

The blurry forms kept shifting position. I felt sweat collecting at the roots of my hair and lower back. Although there was still nothing in my stomach, I could taste acid *again*. Like poison, it was spreading fast in my mouth, from the depth of my throat into my nostrils.

I need to get off. Someone please help me.

But no one came to my rescue, and I had no time left to hesitate; I decided to go with the middle button.

The train should stop at any second. Any second now, it will stop. It has to stop.

But it didn't.

Another long minute passed without air. By then, my whole back was covered in cold sweat. *I'm gonna die…*

But I didn't. Finally, the train began to slow down, and when the doors opened, I saw that ray of sunlight again in the dark, guiding me through the hole and onto the surface, this time out onto a platform. I swallowed the fresh air, and like dry ice, it cut through my air pipes and lungs. My vision began to clear. I saw my hand still clenched around the protective cover. There was only one red safety button now, and it still lay undisturbed behind the glass.

When I got off the train, I wasn't choking, but the tickly cough hadn't stopped. I placed my hand on my chest to double-check that my lungs were still in their place. My forehead was burning and wet; I wiped it with my palm while I looked around, exploring my surroundings. A green metal fence on my right, a clear sky above me, and no sign of a train or a platform. It felt like invisible hands were squeezing my heart as I recognised where I was. The idea of being here again opened up a deep wound in my soul. *How did I get here?*

Instead of fleeing the place, my feet carried me right through the entrance. I was at a park I'd visited several times – but never alone.

The tall trees greeted me like an old friend as I entered the maze of long winding paths. As I walked on, a group of little birds gathered above my head and accompanied me to a bench, where my legs finally gave in and let my body fall. The wrens and robins gave me a delightful concert as if to cheer me up.

Please stop singing. You silly birds, he can't hear you anymore.

Teenage couples were walking in front of me, holding hands, enjoying the heat of the late summer sun. Children were playing

ball games on the grass, and families had gathered for a picnic in the shadows of the trees. *Why are they all smiling? Fools! Don't they know that he's never coming back here?*

As I sat there, the memories started flooding my mind again, until I was drowning in them. With no energy to fight them, I closed my eyes and leaned against the backrest.

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It's been a week since I met him on the Tube, and I still haven't brought myself to open the book. It lies on my bedside cabinet, exactly where I put it when I got home after the concert. I treasure it, watching it from afar. I'm scared that if I ever touch the red cover again, my beautiful dream will vanish in an instant. I'd rather just dream on.

Now I remember why Stephen King's name was so familiar. There was a programme on the telly a few weeks ago, about horror movies based on his writing. It was one of those rare weekends when my brother came to visit. He was watching it because he loves horror movies, and what he loves even more is studying my face as I react to a single bloody movie frame, hiding my eyes behind my palms. He knows I can't stand the sight of blood, even if it's fake. It still looks way too real to me. Will just laughs at me of course.

'The best way to watch a horror movie is to pull for the killer,' he always says. 'That way, you won't be surprised or scared when the innocent start to get slaughtered one by one.' He draws his index finger across his throat, making a sucking noise between his teeth.

My room is full of other books, but I've read them all, some even two or three times. So instead of reading my favourites by Charlotte Brontë or Lucy Maud Montgomery again, I'm sitting at my desk sketching the willow tree outside my window. If I work hard enough, one day I can be a famous artist, and my paintings will be sold at galleries in the city, and people will pay loads of money for them. And once I'm famous and rich,

I can afford expensive clothes and fancy haircuts, and no one will laugh at me anymore.

But today, I can't focus on drawing. The pencil keeps falling out of my hand, and I keep turning to look back towards the book on my bedside cabinet. That novel is my last resort for entertainment because now I'm stuck between the yellowish walls of my room. My father has forbidden me to watch TV or to leave the house – and I bet he'd even forbid me to breathe if he could. I've been locked up at home since he caught me sneaking in after the concert.

I should have seen it coming, but I didn't. He was meant to be asleep when I got home. Who could have predicted that the new chef Bob had hired would set the pub's kitchen on fire and almost burn the whole place down? Okay, perhaps it wasn't such an enormous fire, but the fire brigade had been called. I wonder if Dad stayed behind long enough to come across any of his old mate. *What would they make of him now?*

I bet this fire has been one of the most disturbing incidents in our quiet neighbourhood for years. Everyone had to leave The Beer & Barrel early, and since there's no other pub within walking distance of our house, Dad decided to spend the rest of the evening at home watching TV and trying to catch up on his drinking with his own supply. He only keeps beer at home, so it must have been a slow process. He stores the bottles in the shed, to which he holds the only key, I suppose to keep them away from me. Not that I'd drink his stash of course; I think he's more concerned his precious dark liquid would end up down the drain.

When I got home, he'd already been upstairs and seen my empty bed. He'd been waiting for me in the dark like a wolf hunting a deer. As soon as I entered the house, the dark hallway was flooded with light, and I knew I was trapped.

'Evening, *young laady*… or shall we saay goodnight?'

I'd frozen, my back to him, my fingers still resting on the handle as I quietly shut the door. He was talking like a robot, as if having difficulty forming the words.

'You… think you can go anywhere without my approval? Listen, young lady… because I'll say it only once.'

I turned around. He was leaning against the doorframe leading to the living room. Like him, I looked at the brown bottle in his right hand.

'I'm your *father*… and I tell you what and when… you can do. And right now, I don't want to see you. So off you go. UPSTAIRS, NOW! And you will not leave… your room until… I SAY SO. UNDERSTAND?'

I ran upstairs to my room and threw myself on the bed. That night I didn't bother changing into my pyjamas or drawing my curtains. That night I cried myself to sleep and – as I did most Friday nights – wished my mother was still alive.

The following morning, when the sun was already shining bright up in the sky, there was a short knock on my door. I didn't answer, although I was awake, still lying in bed. I must have only slept for a couple of hours. I'd spent most of the night staring into the darkness, wondering how hard it would be to run away from home and start a life on my own.

One of the problems was that I didn't have any money – or at least not a lot. To be exact, I had twenty-six pounds and seventy-two pence in Pinky, my piggy bank, which was hidden in an old shoebox under a ragged blanket in my wardrobe – nowhere near enough to start a new life elsewhere. And I had no living grandparents (or not ones that would care), no fairy godmother to turn to, and I couldn't expect help from Will either; he'd never approve of me leaving home at fifteen anyway. And to top it all, there was Jules of course. *Jules, Jules, Jules*. She'd definitely stop talking to me if I ran away. Family was sacred to her.

The door handle squeaked, and I quickly turned onto my other side, facing the window. I heard steps and felt my father's weight on the far corner of my bed.

'I know you're awake,' he said. 'I tried to ring you several times yesterday, but it kept going to voicemail.' It was a calm, quiet, almost apologetic voice. So different from the one I'd had to listen to the night before. Like a completely different person.

Still, there was no point explaining there had been no reception on the train.

'Naturally, I thought the worst: that something bad had happened to you. I called your brother, but he didn't know where you were. I tried Juliana, but she didn't answer either. And I had no choice but to ring her mum. I thought I'd give it a try before calling the police and the hospitals. Then she *reminded me* that you went to the concert with Jules.' He heaved a sigh and continued. 'I honestly don't know what else to say, other than I'm extremely disappointed with you both.'

I should have said something. Something like, 'It's not Jules' fault; she didn't know I hadn't been given permission to go. I'm the only one to blame.' I should have said something to defend her, but I stayed silent. My father isn't worth trying to reason with.

'I want you to understand that what you did was wrong. And you must learn that your actions have consequences, so I'm taking these now,' Dad announced, grabbing my phone from my bedside cabinet and moving to unplug my laptop.

'No, please, don't,' I said, trying to take the laptop from him. In the struggle, I was left with only half a cable in my hand. *Why did I even bother trying?*

'And you'll only get them back when you've apologised and promised never to do that again. You can also forget about watching TV for the rest of the summer break. Oh, and one more thing. You must *not* leave the house until I say so.'

With those last sentences, he shut me up; I bit my lower lip so hard I could taste blood. This is the only thing he'll never make me do: apologise to him. No matter what he says or does, he'll never make me respect him – ever. He lost his only chance to do that when he let my mother die.

*

I, too, am responsible for someone's death. The thought of taking after my father in any way felt creepy. Trying to hide from the truth, I laid my head in my hands.

*

I gently take the book in my hands and turn it back and forth carefully between my fingers. The front cover portrays a red-and-white car in flames, while the back offers me a short description of the story and a photo of the author, who kindly smiles back at me. As if he's trying to advertise a kiddie tale, not a horror story. This gives me the shivers, but I finally decide to give it a go.

On the first page, some decent handwriting greets me straight away. '*Have a good time*!' My fingers run across the black letters. When did Henry write that? Did he know he was going to give the book to me, or was the note written by someone else and addressed to him? Questions that may never be answered.

This is how I enter Christine's world.

Christine, what a beautiful name. It could be the name of a fifties love song played on a jukebox. I stop toying with the idea and decide to give all my attention to the story.

Page by page, time passes unnoticed. I get completely lost along my journey through her world, enjoying every line and tasting every word. Sometimes, I have to stop reading for a second but only to tell myself off for biting my nails in excitement. Archie and all the other characters are flesh and blood to me; I wouldn't be surprised to meet them on the street – if I'm ever allowed to walk outside again of course.

The next day, as I reach the last page, another unexpected message smiles up at me. This time, I'm almost a hundred per cent sure it was Henry who scribbled that note and that it was written to me.

> *I hope you liked Christine. If you want to return her to me, you can find me on Wandsworth Common, playing football, between four and six on Thursday afternoon.*

My eyes linger on these sentences for a while before I realise what the note actually means. It's like a message delivered straight from Heaven – *I still have a chance to see him*.

After closing the book, I stretch on my bed with a big smile and press the novel tight to my chest. In my mind, there's only one image: a beautiful pair of hazel eyes.

Suddenly, a tremor starts in my stomach, extending up to my throat before yo-yo-ing back and forth between the two places. I quickly open the book again to reread his last entry.

'Damn it.' I've been in home custody for almost a week, and being a prisoner means I can't just walk through the front (or back) door without being noticed by my father. He's always at home, and by always, I literally mean *all the time* except for those Friday nights. Sometimes he helps Mrs Hardy, our next-door neighbour, trim the hedges on the boundary line between our houses, but that's about it. To get to the front door, I'd have to pass the lounge, and the same applies to the back door, which opens from the kitchen. And I'm sure he's on the sofa right now watching telly or solving crosswords or both, as he does most of the time. Unfortunately, he's only got problems with his leg, not his hearing.

He used to be a firefighter; he was said to have been one of the best in his brigade. He didn't just go and save stray cats hiding in trees, unable to jump down on their own. He was a real hero. His brigade sometimes appeared in the news, and he even got interviewed by the press once or twice. They'd cut people out of crashed cars and run into burning buildings.

I used to be proud of my father; we *all* used to be proud of him. Then, in an instant, everything changed. It happened on a typical October afternoon – I was with him. The trees were shedding their gold-and-burgundy dressing, and grey clouds were gathering in the sky (well, I like to imagine so – my memory about the incident is actually quite vague).

My father was off duty that day. He got up late after a night shift and took me to the local grocery store to pick up some things for Mum. It happened when we were coming out of the shop. He hadn't seen the oncoming vehicle when he stepped off the pavement. But he'd always been so cautious, and many neighbours wondered, later openly discussing in front of us, how

he hadn't heard or seen the car arriving from that junction. He suffered severe injuries, especially to his left leg. They say there was barely any flesh left on the bone, and the white lines of the zebra crossing were painted red when the ambulance arrived.

The driver of the car had stepped on the brake, but it was too late. She suffered minor bruises from the airbag blowing into her face and hitting her chest. She hadn't meant to cause an accident or hurt anyone, she'd sobbed; she'd just wanted to be a good mum and had been rushing to pick up her child in time from school.

The doctors tried their best to save my father's leg and didn't completely fail. They managed to patch him up, but the damage was irreversible; he'd never walk again without a stick or pain.

It wasn't just my father who lost something that day – we *all* did. Although Mum kept saying that even if Dad couldn't find another job, we'd be fine, her smile was never the same after that. As for my father, I've never seen him smile again.

I was only five when it happened. They said I was lucky that the car hadn't hit me too. All I can remember is a flash of lightning; that's how quick it was all over.

Mum kept all the newspaper articles about it, like she'd kept all the other reports about the heroic actions of the local fire service and Dad himself. I often saw her going through the faded pages, but when I asked why she was crying, she'd just quickly put the lid back on the box, wipe her eyes, and say, 'It's nothing, sweetheart. Mummy's just thinking how lucky she is because she's got you and Will.'

When she passed away, I thought about taking the box into my room to read through the articles. To look for something – anything – that would explain why she decided to kill herself, and why my father can't even bear to look at me anymore, but I've never found the box.

Before the car accident, my mother always said Dad had a dangerous job, and she'd been so worried that something would happen to him at work one day. And every time he was about to leave for work, she'd made my brother and me give

him a huge hug and a lot of kisses, despite Dad's protests.

Funnily enough, in the end, it wasn't the dangerous job but that typical autumn afternoon that brought on one of the greater dramas of our life. Fate has a strange sense of humour, I must say. And Dad's been at home ever since. He's never found another job; I don't know if he's ever even tried.

'Damn it,' I say, this time with more desperation since I don't even have a clue what time it might be. For the past two years, I've relied on my phone to tell me the time, but Dad took it as part of my punishment. I'm sure he enjoys my misery. I can always detect the smug satisfaction in his voice when he can tell me off for something. And he always finds a reason to tell me off, even when there's none.

Falling back on my bed, exhausted, I try to figure out what to do next. I'm not allowed to leave the house, but waiting another week to return the book doesn't seem right. (If he'll be in that park next week at all.) If I don't turn up today, he may think I don't want to give it back, but I'm not a thief. I search my room again, hoping to get some ideas for my escape.

I lean out of my window. Based on the position of the sun, it must be mid-afternoon, though it's not easy to tell, because of the large willow tree in our front garden. I've never particularly liked that tree. It's constantly obstructing my view and keeping out the sunshine, and the branches are so long they nearly crash into the glass when the wind blows.

As I decide to make another attempt at asking Dad to cut it down – when he has a sober moment and isn't too busy with punishing me of course – an idea comes to me.

What if I tried to climb down the tree? I'd definitely get some nasty bruises, unless I break my neck first. I've always been average at sports, never outstanding – apart from playing chess. But chess probably doesn't count as a real sport.

It's ridiculous, I tell myself, but I keep glancing at the tree. *How hard can it be?*

It's annoyingly close to my window, and those branches sure seem strong enough to hold me.

When I open my wardrobe, my purple trainers almost jump in my face from the top shelf. I take it as a sign that they'd like the challenge of the tree (rather than a sign of the mess they'd like to escape in my wardrobe). I carefully slide *Christine* into my colourful canvas bag and take a deep sigh.

Alright, ready to do this.

I swallow hard as I move to the window to fling it fully open. The lavender-scented breeze caresses my face.

After climbing onto the outside windowsill, I can easily stand up. I'm about to check the distance to the ground when I change my mind about looking down before I get cold feet. Instead, I target a suitable branch to hang on to, kick off the edge, and grab it easily. *Phew*. I slowly haul myself hand over hand along the branch towards the trunk. However, I can barely hold my weight – gravity is definitely not my friend anymore. My palms start sweating, and I nearly let the branch slip through my fingers.

It takes forever to reach the trunk, but I'm so relieved when I'm done. I descend slowly, lashed by the boughs.

I land hard on the ground, pressing my teeth together from the sharp pain rushing up through my legs from my feet. My hands are throbbing, puffy and red, but I have no time to rest. I can only think of the little time I must have left. *I must return the book today. I must see him today.*

After climbing over our old brown fence – which badly needs new pickets and a fresh layer of stain – I race down the street, almost knocking over a couple of pedestrians. I mumble my apologies and carry on sprinting.

Cars and lorries pass by in the distance, followed by a few buses. I'll have to hurry because I'm sure the last one calls at my destination. I aim to catch it at the next stop right after the underground station on the corner. It may be my only chance to get to the park on time.

The junction is only a hundred feet away. However, my legs are about to give up. My top is drenched in sweat, but I can't stop now – I'm just glad I put on a black one today.

When I turn the corner, fighting my way through the people flooding out of the station, I see the last passenger get on the bus. I wave, hoping the driver will see me in the left-side mirror, but the door closes, and the engine starts.

Desperate, I start beating the glass of the door while trying to keep up with the bus. *Please, Lord, help me. Come on – open, please.*

My prayers are soon answered, and the door makes a buzzing noise. Turning towards the cloudless azure sky, I murmur a 'Thank you'. My faith in God has been somewhat shattered since Mum died, but giving up old habits is difficult.

After finding an empty seat, I focus on breathing, waiting for my heaving chest to calm down. When I finally look up, my eyes meet the frown of an old lady wearing an emerald-green scarf, a hairless cat-like creature on her shoulder. She wrinkles her nose as if she's smelled something bad then turns away. The animal makes a disapproving nod too and lets out a whimper.

What have I done to upset them? I brush my face with both my hands. My cheeks almost scorch the skin off my palms. They probably think my head will blow up any minute.

I can hardly wait to press the red button as we approach the park. But when the bus finally stops, and my feet hit the ground again, my stomach twists. I hate this gut feeling – it usually means I've missed something or something terrible is about to happen.

The air has cooled down, and though the sun is still shining, not so brightly as before, it's shifted west on the horizon. As I look up at the sky, the muscles in my stomach tighten even further.

Suddenly, the clues, like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, fit together in my head. *It must be later than I thought*. I storm into the park. *He must be here somewhere. He can't have left yet*.

Wandsworth Common turns out to be a vast maze and has more devious paths than I've expected. Pausing at each intersection, I keep looking for him, though deep in my heart, I'm convinced I'm too late.

After finding the empty football pitches, I stop and angrily kick the ground, triggering a rising pain in my foot. I heave a sigh. *No more jumping from trees for me for a while.*

With my hands in my jeans pockets and my eyes on the pavement, I immediately start thinking about my next mission. I must figure out how to get back into my room – invisibly.

I drag myself back towards where I entered the park. Buses come frequently on a weekday, meaning I won't have to wait long to get home.

'Home' – such a funny word. When other people say 'home', it has a positive meaning. They say it with such affection. A warm place: where one can feel safe, where one can feel loved among their family. Where one can't wait to return to after a long journey.

But I don't want to go *home*! Our house isn't warm; it doesn't feel safe, and I'm definitely not loved.

I'm not looking forward to my next punishment either. I wonder what my father will give me this time. Because if he doesn't already know I've left custody, he'll probably catch me when I sneak back in, like last time. I should have thought about it before leaving, but I'm not that wise. They say people learn from their mistakes, but I don't. My mistakes should be used as learning material for others, because I keep making the same ones.

'Hey, Elizabeth. Nice to see you again. I was beginning to think you weren't coming today.'

My heart starts to pound as I look up, searching for the source of the familiar voice. The last rays of sunshine are still so blinding I have to use my hand as a visor. And there he is. Sitting on the backrest of a bench with a football in his hands, smiling, his hair gilded by the sun and glowing like dark gold.

He gets off the bench, leaving the ball on the seat, and starts towards me. The moment our eyes meet again, I forget how to breathe.

'Hi… I have your book with me,' I say, finally remembering why I came here in the first place, and my hands go searching

for *Christine* in the jungle of my bag. 'Just a minute, I've got it here—' *Somewhere*. I can only hope it hasn't got covered in ink from a leaky pen. 'Got it.' I pull out the book. *Perfect; not a stain*. 'Thanks.'

He glances at the book, turning the pages back and forth as if counting that all 768 are still there, his fingers long and slender, like a pianist's.

'So how did you find it?'

'You were certainly right; she's no ordinary girl.'

His watchful eyes make me uncomfortable, and I quickly wipe away the beads of sweat that linger on my forehead.

'Good. Glad you liked it,' he says with a smile. 'To be honest, I was a bit sceptical that you'd ever start reading it.'

'Why?'

'Nothing… I was obviously wrong.' He shrugs. 'It's just… Never mind.'

'Go on. What is it?'

'It's just you don't come across as a person who reads much horror,' he says, as if choosing the words carefully.

'So what sort of books do you think I like? And is this how you normally meet girls? Leaving secret messages in books? How many books of yours are scattered around the world? Or do you always use the same novel? *Christine* does look a little exhausted, I must say.'

Where was that count to five again?

'I scribbled those notes when you fell asleep on the train. I wasn't sure if you were coming because, as I said earlier, I didn't know if you'd like the book. That's a risk I had to take, I suppose.'

'Or I could have been a very slow reader.'

'True.'

'Wouldn't it have been easier to ask for my phone number?'

'Would you have given it to me?'

'Maay-bee.'

'Wouldn't you have found me boring then?'

'Who says I don't find you boring now?'

'Ouch, that hurt,' he says, placing his hands over his chest.

'What would you have done if I hadn't turned up today?'

'I guess I'd have to come back next Thursday.'

'And what if I didn't turn up next week either?'

'Then I'd have to come on the following one.'

'What if I never turned up?'

'Gosh, are you always this difficult?' He laughs, tilting his head. 'Okay,' he sighs, defeated. 'Then I'd post an ad in a newspaper asking the pretty redhead from the District Line to give me back my book.'

This is the first time a boy has called me pretty… I pretend I haven't heard the redhead part – it's a curse I have to live with.

'And what if I never read that newspaper?'

'Then I'd be terribly sad and disappointed and wouldn't know how to go on living.'

'Really?'

'Yeah, of course – that book means a lot to me.'

He takes one more step and stops right in front of me, our bodies almost touching. His eyes are fixed on mine. He may be only four or five inches taller than me, but I begin to feel like Gulliver in the Land of the Giants. Suddenly, my bag feels heavier again on my shoulder. Weighing exactly one exciting novel more.

'I'd like you to keep it,' he says.

'I can't. It's yours. You just told me how important it is to you,' I protest, but before I can lift the flap of my bag, he gently places his hand on mine. I can feel sparks on the back of my hand as we touch. *Can he feel them too?*

'It is, and I've read it many times,' he says. 'Come on. If it's so hard to accept as a gift, just think of it as a favour you can do for me – I'm asking you to look after it for me for an indefinite period.' And he even adds a '*pleeease*'.

I shake my head. 'Believe me, it's really not a good idea.'

He slowly pulls his hand away, taking a step back. *If I felt the electricity between us before, how can I describe the opposite?* The air has cooled, and I know I need to do or say something quickly to get those sparks back.

'Don't get me wrong, I do appreciate it. I'd love to keep it. Great novel, really. It's just… that… I'm not good at looking after things.'

The smile finally returns to his face. 'I trust you.'

He leans closer to me. The scent of his neck reminds me of the forests in Scotland where we stayed once after Dad's accident. I can feel his gentle fingers wandering through my hair. I'm almost certain what's about to happen next. The seconds pass, and my eyes are still closed. Soon, the pleasant scent starts to fade from my nose, and I peek out from behind my eyelashes.

'These were in your hair,' he says, holding up a couple of leaves. 'What happened to you, crazy girl? Have you been chased up a tree by lions or something?'

My eyes widen in shock as I begin to fix my ruffled hair right away. In my bag, there's always room for a water bottle, a notepad, a couple of pencils, my MP3 player, my Oyster card, and a pack of chewing gum. Still, I'd give everything now if they magically transformed into a comb and a mirror. *Why do I never carry such useful girly items with me?* Now it's clear why that old woman on the bus was staring at me like I was an idiot.

'Or something… long story,' I murmur as I run my fingers through my hair one last time.

'Well, I have plenty of time…'

Maybe it's the kind look in his eyes, or the innocent smile on his face, but my embarrassment starts to melt away. He grabs his ball, and we set off together on the path ahead.

'Are you okay? You're walking a bit funny,' he adds.

I look down at my legs. The next second, that long-forgotten ache rises in my toes again, spreading all the way to my ankle. *Definitely no more jumping off trees for me*.

CHAPTER 5
DARKNESS DESCENDS

The park slowly grew empty, the birds fell into silence, and I couldn't see the vivid green shades of the grass or the trees. Everything had become black, brown, and dark orange, casting long shadows in the poor light of the lamp posts.

I knew I couldn't delay going back to the flat forever, so I tried to rise from the bench, but I slipped and fell back right away. When attempting to rise for the second time, I took extreme care, holding on to the edges of the wooden seat. Once on my feet, I had to find my balance before setting off towards where I recalled one of the exits of the park might be.

Suddenly, a dark form was in front of me, blocking my way.

'Hey ya, precious! What are ya doing here in the dark all by yaself? Ya know it's very dangerous for a young lady like ya walking alone at night. Hey, can ya hear me?'

I was going to take a step back, but I had to stop. Not because I was afraid but because I wasn't sure whether taking a step back would land me on my back.

'Let me go,' I sighed.

'Say please first. A lady should know how to ask politely.'

'Pleeaase.'

'See, it ain't that hard. Yeah, ya can go, but first, I say we do a little business. Just me and you. Gimme what ya've got, and then ya can go, precious. What do ya say? Isn't it a good deal, precious?'

Something silvery glistened in the man's hand.

I was silent. At the back of my mind, a light bulb switched on. Here was my chance to *get away*.

'Are ya deaf? Gimme the bag, precious. Don't make me ask twice.'

'No.'

The next second, something sharp and cold was pressed against my throat.

'Gimme the DAMN BAG. Do ya want me to hurt ya? We don't want that, do we?'

I held the bag to my chest, crossing my arms over it. My body, on the edge of falling apart, surprised me by still being able to perform this final act. 'Go on, do it. Please.'

He was trying to grab the bag from my hands, but my nails sank into the soft leather, fighting for it, clinging to it tight. I closed my eyes and channelled all my remaining energy into my fingers.

I only opened my eyes when I heard footsteps moving away and a low murmur that sounded like 'stupid bitch'.

I lingered there for a while, hoping the stranger would reappear from the dark and start wrestling for my bag again. But he didn't.

I could only take a step before I had to stop again. My feet were killing me, so I decided to remove my shoes and continued barefoot. My hands were shaking as I started to undo the straps. Picking up the shoes, I stumbled towards the exit. The concrete felt pleasantly warm under my feet.

*

'It's tirty-two pounds and shickty pence.'

A dark pair of eyes was staring at me through a glass wall.

Where am I? How did I get here? Did I fall asleep? No, that can't be—?

'Tirty-two pounds shickty, miss. You gonna pay or what?' repeated the man, before he started to speak very rapidly in a foreign language, sometimes switching to English. The only word I could catch was 'police'. He only shut up when I'd handed him all the money from my purse without counting.

I got out of the cab, and it whooshed away. I slowly turned around to find myself at a familiar soundless block of flats…

After stumbling through the entrance of the building into the lobby, I had to compose myself to climb the two flights of stairs. Holding my shoes and bag in one hand, I tried to find a firm grip on the railing in the dark, then dragged myself up to the right-hand door on the second floor. Inside waited the tiny studio flat we'd been renting together.

Though Henry had made sure it was always neat and tidy, even two years after we'd moved in, it wasn't fully furnished, but there was barely any floor area uncovered: we had a built-in wardrobe, plus some items donated by his parents – like a narrow red winged armchair and kitchen utensils – and some lucky finds from the British Heart Foundation – a shelving unit, a TV stand, and a sofa bed. Indeed, the flat looked like a doll's house cluttered with oversized furniture.

Was it really yesterday morning that I left this place for the funeral? It seemed like centuries ago…

It took me a while to find my keyring in my small bag, then my trembling fingers had trouble picking out the right key and sliding it into the lock. Once inside, I dropped my bag and shoes and fled to the bathroom.

Feeling faint, I splashed water on my face and neck, and held on to the edges of the sink to avoid collapsing as I looked in the mirror. Narrowed pale-blue eyes stared back at me – the look of prey chased by a predator. Half of the animal's long hair was hanging untidily, some of it still pinned up at the back of her head. Her white, bloodless lips were first half open then pressed together into a thin white line.

To steady myself, I grabbed the sink with more force. I wanted to scream, but my voice got lost in my throat. My heart was beating like a ticking bomb, fast and loud.

Then *BANG*…

No animal was staring back at me from where the big round mirror had been just seconds ago. My right fist was clenched in the middle of the metal frame.

A sharp ache rushed through me as the tension in my fingers released. A piece of glass had sunk into the side of my palm. I set my teeth as I pulled it out then covered my hand with a towel. While trying to stop the bleeding, I saw a larger shard on the floor, and I let the towel fall. I picked up the fragment of glass and watched it in a daze, as if it had some kind of magical power. As I held it high, the wild animal eyed me again. Then I pointed the shard at my left wrist. The tip of the glass felt cold against my skin. I knew a bit more pressure would do the job.

I shuddered, and my eyes snapped open.

It was the same peculiar feeling I'd experienced on the platform. And again, I became perfectly relaxed within seconds – only my inner resolve was gone. I could swear I'd heard the exact same three words: 'Think it over.'

I waved it away again as being a trick of my clouded mind, but when the voice addressed me, the glass slipped out of my hand.

I laughed bitterly. *I've always been a coward. How could I be brave enough to end my misery now?* My mother had had the courage to go through with it and leave everything behind – I wished I was more like her.

I moved away from the washstand and turned on the bath taps. By the time I'd finished stripping, the thick hot steam had filled the small bathroom, and when the bathtub was filled almost to the brim, I sank into the water. Some water drops, stuck inside the taps, finally found their way out to be reunited with my bath water, drawing ripples on the surface.

When the water had cooled slightly, I slid my head beneath the surface to listen to the air bubbles popping loudly as they left my lips. Then I closed my eyes and started counting.

One, two, three, four…

I'd got to twenty-two when my eyes opened wide. My head rose to the surface, and I gasped for air – as if my body had been dragged out from the water by an invisible force.

My ears were buzzing, I was coughing badly, and my heart was racing. Yet, a few moments later, I felt perfectly relaxed

– my chest had calmed, and I got out of the bathtub. I dried myself and reached for my dressing gown, which was hanging on the bathroom door; I couldn't help noticing the other dressing gown next to mine and quickly fled the room.

My hand was still aching, and I went to the kitchen cupboard to grab some painkillers. Instead of a couple, I swallowed a handful. *Taking them worked for my mother; it should work for me too.*

Then I stumbled across the room. In the dark, I found shelter in the armchair by the window. In the building opposite, there were still a few flats where the lights were on, displaying the lives of ordinary people: an elderly man watching TV, falling asleep in a similar armchair to mine; a couple cuddling up on the sofa; a child wandering into his parents' bedroom with his teddy, unable to sleep.

Why are they so peaceful and happy? Don't they know he's never coming back?

When those windows had turned black, too, I started listening to the silence of the street. My stomach hurt, and I was fighting nausea once again. Then my body suddenly felt light, and darkness fell upon me too.

CHAPTER 6

SHELTERED

When I woke up for the first time, I was sure I'd arrived in Heaven. I was lying on a cloud, surrounded by warmth and peace. Peeking through the curtain of my eyelashes, I could see bright whiteness around me, and whispering voices kept echoing in my skull, though the sound was pleasing, because they were ever so gentle.

I made a powerless effort to get up, but a firm hand stopped me.

'Just relax – take it easy,' an elderly angel said in a soft voice as she leaned over me with a smile on her face and a rod of silvery light in her hand.

I did as she asked. I lay back on my cloud, and before my eyes closed again, I could see sparkles popping out of the very top of that beautiful silvery rod, then she pressed the tip of it against my skin…

*

As I came to for the second time, I noticed the cloud beneath me had changed into something thicker and more stable, with edges, though right under my head it stayed quite soft and flexible.

Though my eyes were still closed, I could sense it was now pitch-black, and as far as I knew, it was never dark in Heaven. Also, my head was throbbing; I could barely endure the pain. These two facts contradicted my earlier theory. I was

disappointed but not surprised – Heaven just wasn't meant for me.

I pressed my hands to my temples, massaging them, trying to keep my head in one piece. There was a plastic tube attached to the back of my hand, limiting my movements. I stared at the spot where the needle had penetrated my skin and almost let out a bitter laugh. Of course – the silvery light rod had been nothing but a syringe. Though whatever I'd been given, I wished there'd been more of it so I might still be asleep.

And then I realised what had woken me: a loud pulsating noise. Someone was playing the drums right next to me – faster and faster, not stopping even for a second. I pulled my head under the duvet and even pushed the pillow on top, but it didn't help.

After a while, I gave up, removing the pillow and the duvet and opening my eyes. It took some time for them to adjust to the darkness. It was a rather small room, and the walls were bare. I could only see elongated shadows cast by the few pieces of furniture. Parallel to my bed was another one with someone lying in it, though I could only make out their silhouette as they were lying on their side. To my surprise, they hadn't been woken by the noise.

And then, all at once, the rhythmical beating transformed into something else. A gentle and familiar noise. And now I could tell that it was coming from the window behind the other bed. My mind then associated the sound with a word: *rain*.

*

Silent raindrops fall on my cheek, even on my eyelashes. But I don't care. I'm with *him*, and time passes so fast when I'm with him. I must cherish every second we can spend together. I still can't believe that my father doesn't mind me seeing Henry.

Dad, of course, wasn't pleased when he had to pick me up from A&E. When I'd told the doctor about jumping out of a

tree, he said I should consider myself lucky that my ankles were only bruised and not broken. He also told me to rest them for a week at least. I don't know why I couldn't make something up about how I'd bruised my ankles. When he asked me, I didn't have enough time to think, so I told him the first thing that came to my mind, which was the truth unfortunately. I'm just not good at making up stories on the spot.

I didn't want to go to the hospital, but Henry had insisted. I only gave in because I hadn't wanted to start our friendship with an argument.

Once the doctor had examined me, Henry offered to get a cab to take me home, but I declined. Then he wouldn't leave me alone until I'd rung someone from my family to come for me. He said he wanted to make sure I got home safely. At that point, I was annoyed with myself for not accepting his earlier offer.

Dad didn't even seem surprised when I called him. When I told him where I was, he only said, 'I'll be right there,' and hung up. I couldn't detect any anger in his voice, but he probably needed time to process the news. After all, he first had to get over the shock that I wasn't where I was supposed to be. I was sure he'd develop signs of healthy anger by the time he arrived at the hospital, and then I'd have my fair share of yelling from him.

But when Dad arrived, he didn't yell at me; he didn't even raise his voice. While he was talking to me, he kept eyeing Henry, who was standing in the far corner of the room, as if he were an alien from another planet. My father had a chat with the doctor too, and as soon as he'd made sure I was capable of walking, he addressed Henry.

'And you are?'

'Henry Abbott, sir. A friend of Elizabeth's.'

My father did raise an eyebrow at the word 'friend', but he let it pass.

'It's all my fault, sir,' said Henry. 'I asked Elizabeth to meet me this afternoon.'

Dad snorted. 'So I gather. And what exactly was my daughter doing with you, kid?'

I was going to intervene, but Henry was faster.

'We were discussing a book, sir.'

My father raised his eyebrow again, this time even higher. 'A book?'

'Yes, sir,' said Henry calmly.

'This one,' I said quickly, pulling *Christine* out of my bag.

'Go and get in the car, Liz,' Dad told me. I said goodbye to Henry and followed my father out.

Almost two weeks passed without me hearing from Henry. Then on the thirteenth day, the doorbell woke me. It was just after nine o'clock. We never had visitors so early, and Will had keys to get in, so I was anxious to see who it was. I put on my dressing gown and hurried downstairs, but by the time I got to the hall and opened the door, the visitor was gone. I locked the front door and was about to climb back up the stairs when I saw a shadow sitting on the living-room sofa.

'Hi. How did you get in?' I asked.

'Nice to see you too, Elizabeth,' Henry replied.

'How did you get in?'

'Your father let me in.'

'*My father*?'

He nodded.

'How did you know where we lived?'

'I called him to ask.'

'*Called*?'

'You know when you dial someone's number on the phone.'

'That's not what I meant.'

He grinned. 'I know what you meant. Just winding you up. In the hospital, you borrowed my mobile to call your dad. You remember, don't you?' he asked. He looked at me, his eyes travelling down my body. 'I can see you're walking fine now. I like your slippers.'

I looked down at my feet. I'd forgotten I was still in my pyjamas under the dressing gown and was wearing the pink fluffy

bunny slippers my brother had brought me last Christmas.

'I'll be back in a sec,' I said, quickly adding, 'Don't move.'

I rushed back upstairs and got changed. Then I washed my face, combed my messy hair, and pulled it into a ponytail. Five minutes later, when I returned to the living room, I found my father sitting in an armchair, having tea and discussing the weather with Henry.

They didn't seem to notice my arrival, so I quietly sat at the other end of the sofa. It just didn't seem right that Dad and Henry were in the same room *again*. And of all places, this time in our house. They then chatted about football (using technical words only real football enthusiasts know) and the latest world news. They didn't even try to involve me in the conversation – not that I'd have had much to say on the subject of sport.

Slowly, the clock on the wall ticked away, and it turned half ten before they acknowledged my presence.

'Well, Henry— That's your name, isn't it? You seem like a pleasant boy, but I'm sure you didn't just come here to chat with an old man like me all morning.'

My father is forty-six. He may not know what BitTorrent is or how to download a film, but he's not exactly a proper dinosaur.

'You're right, sir. The truth is I came to ask something from you. With your permission, I'd like to take Elizabeth out for a walk this afternoon,' said Henry, pulling a folded paper from his jeans pocket. 'Here's my mobile and home number, address, and parents' details, sir.'

My father glanced at the sheet but didn't reply. I wished I wasn't there. I was sure Henry would learn my father's true colours then. Any second, Dad would start yelling about how dare some kid ask his only daughter out. And anyway, Henry didn't even know I was meant to spend the rest of the summer holidays in my room. My father hadn't yet come up with a punishment for sneaking out a second time, but I was sure it was only a matter of time.

I could hardly believe my ears when he finally spoke.

'Some fresh air wouldn't harm her. She hasn't been out for two weeks.'

*

This is now the third time we've been to the park. Walking on paths we know intimately now and talking about everything that comes to our minds. Mainly I do the talking. He doesn't seem to mind. When he looks me straight in the eye, I always get confused and forget what I've been talking about, so I start mumbling about something else.

'What's your favourite colour?' I ask. 'Mine used to be yellow. You know that very bright yellow that sometimes looks rather orangish or light gold in the light. I loved yellow because I'm really fond of sunflowers. We once visited the National Gallery on a school trip, and there was this painting by Van Gogh. He's the one who cut his ear off with a razor blade and later gave it to a prostitute as a gift or something like that. Really nasty business – I could never do that: cut my own ear off.

'Anyway, there was this amazing painting – the brushstrokes, the colours, everything was so perfect about it. I think the group had already moved on, and the teacher had to come back for me because I couldn't move away from it. I became totally obsessed with sunflowers and Van Gogh. When I was younger, I drew sunflowers everywhere in the house – on the table, on the walls, on the carpet – and my parents would go *mad*. I still love them, the sunflowers. It's just the colour; I can't stand it anymore.

'Of course, you can't like something, especially a beautiful flower, without liking its colour, right? But I guess nothing can be a hundred per cent perfect. So I decided purple would be my new favourite colour. Few people like purple… wonder why? I asked Dad ages ago to paint my bedroom walls purple, but he hasn't done it. They're still very yellow. Not bright yellow, but yellow alright.

'A couple of months ago, though, I read somewhere that, according to feng shui, purple isn't a good choice for a bedroom colour. Or was it violet? Anyway, I don't think I believe in that superstitious stuff.

'Oh, gosh, sorry. I've been talking a lot of rubbish again.'

'It's okay; I like to listen to people,' he says, smiling.

I like when he smiles.

'It's your turn now. What's your favourite colour?'

'I don't think I have one.' He scratches his head, thinking, then looks into my eyes and quickly adds, 'But if I had to go with one, I'd say blue. Definitely blue.'

I blush, trying to avoid his stare.

'So why don't you like yellow anymore?'

'I don't know,' I say. I realise how silly it all sounds, so I quickly change the subject, asking him what things he likes, but he seems puzzled, as if he didn't understand my question.

'There are so many things I like. It would be hard to pick a couple out of a hundred. You need to be a bit more specific.'

'Just list them all,' I demand.

My hunger for learning everything about him just keeps growing as he talks. Henry tells me how he'd like to be an engineer one day, building bridges where currently none exist. He says his dream is to help people connect with each other by connecting places. And he mentions he's thinking about joining the navy.

'There's no other place that has more order than that,' he says. 'And I want to be of use. When I'm old, I want to think back on my life and be able to say that I've done something for others. Something good. Life's too short to be wasted.'

As I watch the words slip from his lips, I can't help wondering what it would be like to taste them one day…

Then the sound of thunder brings me back from my dreamland. Raindrops fall on my head and on my shoulders, and then there's another rumble in the sky; this time, the noise makes me jump. Soon, the rain starts falling in torrents, and we run out of the park to find some cover from the storm.

We manage to flee under an empty bus shelter just outside the park. I shake myself, but my light summer dress doesn't move; it's stuck to my belly and hips like glue. I rub my arms, trying to warm myself up, and he steps close to me, wiping the rain from my wet face with both his hands.

'Is it just me, or is it freezing now?' I ask, and I keep thinking, *I should have brought a jumper and an umbrella, like my father told me to, but when do I ever listen to him?* 'The weather forecast said it would be sunny all afternoon. Just look around. Does this look sunny to you?'

He leans down to me, and I can feel his warm breath on my face. He must be able to hear my racing heartbeat since I can hear his. Soon, my heart obediently falls into the rhythm his dictates.

'I guess I should stop watching the weather forecast; seriously, it's just a waste of time,' I whisper. 'I think I'll shut up now.'

'Good idea.'

The moment his soft lips brush mine, electricity sparks through my spine; I can't feel the cold or the wind anymore. Time stops, and only we exist.

When finally our lips part, he takes a step back, still holding my face in his palms. I don't know how long we stand like this before the words find me.

'Do you even know my last name?'

He laughs. 'I know exactly who you are, Elizabeth.'

'And who am I?'

He hesitates for a second, as if scared of saying what he's about to, but then looks me deep in the eyes. The way he's gazing at me makes me feel like he isn't looking at the weak body or flushed face of a fifteen-year-old girl but is able to see right through me, staring into my very soul. His next words confirm this.

'The girl I'm in love with.'

I feel like I'm floating on pink clouds. And I don't want to wake up from this dream ever. Tears of joy gather in my

eyes, but I want to seem strong, so instead of crying, I just fall towards him and fold my arms around him. I never want to let him go. I want to capture this moment and keep it in my heart forever.

And I whisper in his ear, '*Je t'aime, te amo, ich liebe dich*, and I love you in all the languages of the world.'

*

'Look. She's opening her eyes. How are you feeling, Lizzie?'

My vision was much clearer this time, but I needed time to get used to the blinding daylight reflecting off the painfully white walls. The hospital room felt cold and alien. Too bright for my tired eyes.

On the other bed, a young girl was sitting with her legs pulled up, her arms around her knees. Razor marks covered her wrist and the whole of her forearm. Her face was snow white, her black hair cut short and straight, reminding me of Elizabeth Taylor's famous Cleopatra. Her hair brushed the edge of her chin as she swung back and forth on the bed. She kept biting her black nails and glancing at the ceiling, as if she feared the whole building would collapse and bury her any minute.

On my left, I found Will leaning towards me, caressing my bandaged hand. Sarah, his fiancée, was standing behind him, resting her hands on his shoulders, her perfectly polished pink fingernails sinking into his shirt.

Why are they both smiling? He's not coming back. Why does no one seem to know this?

Pretending to fall asleep again, I turned my head on the pillow and pulled my hand away from him, hiding it under the duvet.

'Liz, I'm so sorry we couldn't make it to Henry's funeral. Our plane got delayed from Sydney, and we missed the connecting flight in China. It was a nightmare. We even lost half our luggage…'

The sound of his name was like being stabbed in the chest.

*

'You're the only person who calls me Elizabeth.'

It's our sixth date in the park; he was waiting for me with a sunflower in hand. On the fourth, he took me to the cinema to watch *Fifty First Dates* – it was my choice, really, between that or *Shaun of the Dead*. And on the fifth, I dragged him to the National Gallery to show him my favourite post-Impressionist paintings by Van Gogh.

We sit on the same bench as on our previous dates, holding hands and watching people passing by. We could do so many other things instead of sitting here – hop on a bus and explore London, get on the London Eye and watch the city shrink beneath us, pay a visit to Madame Tussauds and take some tacky pictures with the wax celebrities. Still, I prefer the tranquillity of this park. I think he prefers it too. I feel free and happy here, with *him*. Maybe because this place feels sacred, a secret garden away from my father, away from everyone.

'I thought that was your name,' he says, confused.

'Yes, but no one ever calls me Elizabeth.'

'What would you like me to call you then?'

'Elizabeth is fine; I like the way you say it. It makes me feel special,' I admit sheepishly. 'I was just wondering why you preferred my full name, that's all.'

He rubs his chin as if deciding whether to be honest about it. 'You know, I don't understand when people have kids and come up with these long names, like Christopher and Annabella. No one will use those names for them. Even the parents, because they're just too long – except when they want to tell them off for something. In the end, they use short forms, like Chris and Bella. So what was the point in giving them those long names in the first place? Those children will learn to hate their own names because they'll only hear them when punished. At least my parents make a conscious effort to call my brother Timothy, not just Tim.'

'So that's why you call me Elizabeth,' I murmur.

'That's why I call you Elizabeth,' he agrees. 'Because that's your given name, and it's a lovely name. You should be proud of it.'

'I see. I like your name too. Henry. It really suits you. If I had to pick my favourite boy's name out of ten thousand, I'd pick Henry.'

He laughs. 'Really? Why?'

'Because it sounds like a slow wave in the ocean.' I can already hear the open waters whispering his name in my head. 'Heen-ryy,' I add with a smile. *My Henry*.

*

'Dad wasn't there either,' I said quietly.

'Huh, where? Ouch!' I could picture the pink nails sinking deeper into Will's shirt. 'Oh.'

'He wasn't there. He didn't turn up,' I said.

'I'm sure he meant to be there…' he replied, but he didn't sound convinced.

'But he wasn't,' I retorted, pushing myself up and turning towards him before falling back on the pillow.

'Will, I think we should go now. It's best to leave Liz to get some rest,' suggested Sarah, but my brother carried on.

'Lizzie, I'm sorry. *We* are both very sorry for your loss. First Henry, and now the baby. I can't even begin to imagine how you feel right now.' He put his hand on my side, but I didn't move. 'Liz, please, don't be like this. We'd just like to help you.'

'*Will*.'

'Okay, alright,' he sighed. 'Let's go.'

Before the door closed behind them, Will walked around the bed to kiss my forehead. 'Love you, pumpkin. We'll be back soon.'

When they'd left, I felt a teardrop leave my face, soaking the pillowcase under my chin. I hadn't been able to cry for a long time, and the teardrop felt so cool, so soothing against the burning feeling in my cheek. I wished more tears would come, but none did.

Under the blanket, I started fidgeting with the engagement ring my brother had been fondling a few minutes ago and felt the never-ending darkness swallowing me again.

The baby. He definitely said, 'The baby.'

CHAPTER 7

BURNING BRIDGES

'These dresses are gorgeous. Look at this strapless one. I love the way the little stones sparkle around the waistline. Have you tried on your dress yet?'

Little stones? Sparkle? Whose words are these?

'What dress?'

'The bridesmaid one of course,' said Jules and stopped turning the pages of the magazine she'd been pretending to read for the past half hour. She gave me an unmistakable look that said: *What else do you think I'm talking about?*

I noticed how different she looked now. The young woman in front of me wasn't the Jules I pictured when I thought of her – she wasn't a skinny girl with thick glasses anymore. She was still slim but with curves, mainly around the hips, and she'd swapped the glasses for contact lenses. She didn't wear black clothes or tight corsets and full skirts anymore either, or not very often, and she'd stopped dyeing her naturally dark hair coal black. Her once olive skin looked somewhat paler, especially against her fuchsia lipstick.

'No, I'm not going to be a bridesmaid,' I said. 'I already told Sarah.'

'It's your brother's wedding.' Shock, reproach, and disappointment – they were all there in those four words.

Unable to face her, I turned back to the window. It was pouring with rain, and the raindrops were crawling down the glass like thousands of little worms. There was no movement in our street, and apart from the bare tree at my window, everything,

including the cars parked on the driveways, the tall fences hiding the neighbours' gardens, and even my own reflection, looked faded and grey.

'Liz, it's been seven months now,' she pleaded.

'Seven months and five days,' I murmured.

'Sorry, what did you just say?'

'I said, seven months and five days,' I repeated louder.

She heaved a deep sigh before she spoke again. 'This is exactly what I'm talking about. It must be extremely difficult for you, and I know it's hard to hear, but you can't go on like this. You're torturing yourself for something you weren't responsible for. It's not fair.'

I looked at her. She was wrong. The only thing that wasn't fair was that he was gone, and no matter what I did, I couldn't change that. It wasn't fair that someone should die when they hadn't lived.

'Just look at yourself. You're walking around like a zombie. You should carry on with your studies; you can't just stay locked up in here forever,' she said. 'You need to go on with your life. You need to stop torturing yourself. I worry about you. Everyone does.'

'You can't understand.' *How could she ever understand? How could anyone understand?*

'Would you really like me to understand? Then you need to talk to me, and you know I'll listen. But you're wrong if you think Henry would be happy to see you like this. Do you think he'd want to see you suffer? He loved you so much, seeing you like this would break his heart.'

'I'm fine.'

'We both know that's not true. But I can't help you if you don't let me.' She sighed again as if giving up the fight.

Then, a minute later, she added, 'How is your brother doing?' Her question surprised me, but I thought she was trying to steer the conversation away from Henry.

'I think he's doing alright.'

'Are you sure? You don't seem to leave your cave too much. When was the last time you talked to him?'

I shrugged. 'We talk…'

'I mean, *really* talked to him, not a yes or no conversation. Has he talked to you about the wedding?'

'About the wedding? Why?'

'Because you're his only sibling. He seemed very much on edge when he opened the door to me. Have you asked him or Sarah if they needed any help? And have you thanked him for saving your life? You'd probably be dead if it wasn't for him.'

She was right. He'd broken into the flat with Sarah to find me dazed and confused, and tried to rock me back into consciousness. The doctors said it was amazing I'd woken up at all, given the number of painkillers I'd taken, not to mention how dehydrated I was. Still, I thought, he'd have saved me if he'd let me die.

Jules ignored my silence and continued her lecture.

'If you think you're the only one having a hard time, you're wrong. Where's the Liz who always thinks about others? If you can't move on, your family can't go on with their lives either. They've also suffered from Henry's death, and they're still suffering.'

Jules didn't understand that all I did was think about them. I was *only* thinking about others: Henry's parents, brother, and friends. That because of me, they'd never be able to see him again, and I'd never be able to face them again. Like now, she didn't seem to understand how painful it was for me even to hear his name; she carried on regardless. Sometimes, her bluntness made me question why I was still friends with her… But then I remembered her holding me while I cried my heart out after Mum died. I'd have done the same for her when her dad died, but tears didn't come easy to her. It seemed we all mourned differently.

'We've never talked about this,' she said, 'but I want you to know I'm sorry about the baby. I wish you'd told me about it at the time… that I had to learn about it from your brother. But then I realised you probably hadn't known yourself…'

'Known what?'

'That you were pregnant.'

'Do we really have to talk about this? What do you want me to say? Did you really think we were planning to have a family at the age of twenty without having steady jobs, without finishing university?'

'I'm so sorry, Liz.'

'Yeah, me too. I just want people to understand that I don't need anyone's pity. I just want to be left alone.'

'Be careful what you wish for,' said Jules, slowly articulating each word, then glanced at her phone and got up from my bed, putting the magazine in her bag. I was sure she'd only bought it so she could bring up the wedding.

'I've gotta go now. Steve just texted me; he's outside, waiting. We're going to the cinema. I was going to ask if you wanted to come with us, but I had the feeling you'd say no. Anyway, this is for you,' she said, pulling out a clear plastic box and a rectangular package from her bag and placing them on my desk. 'Happy Birthday! I wasn't sure if I'd see you next week, so I thought I'd just give it to you now. And Mum made some baklava for you.'

I could tell from her tone she meant: *I wasn't sure if you wanted to see me next week.*

She guessed right; I didn't feel like going out – not now, not ever.

I asked Jules to pass on my thanks to her mum, and she nodded.

She was about to leave my room; her hand was clenched around the door handle, when I stopped her. 'Jules, why do you still care about me?'

She turned back and frowned. 'You know why. I love you and you're my best friend, but you can't keep pushing me away. You need to start listening… Everyone has their limits,' she said. 'Please, talk to your brother.'

I picked up the package from my desk. I could feel the hard edges of a rectangular object under my fingers and tore off the wrapping paper. It was a framed photo of me and Jules,

hugging each other in the garden, pressing our cheeks together and smiling into the camera. It had been taken the winter before we went to the concert at Wembley.

*

Will was having his usual cereal and reading the morning paper when I entered the kitchen. Sarah must have already left for work. The two of them had decided to move back to our childhood home to save money for their wedding, and the three-bed house felt smaller than ever. At least Sarah was easy to live with though – unlike my brother, who had a habit of sticking his nose into my life.

I tried to stay invisible, but I didn't succeed.

'Hey, Liz, you okay?' Will asked, almost spitting out the cereal.

'Uh-huh,' I said, taking the milk out of the fridge.

'Great. There's something I need to talk to you about.'

Jules' voice echoed in my head. '*You need to start listening…*'

'Yes?' I asked, feigning interest as I made myself a mug of tea. I was about to stir the milk in when he continued.

'I hope it's okay with you, but Sarah and I thought, er, that we'd invite Henry's parents for dinner one day. If you don't mind of course. I thought – *we thought* – it would be good for you to see them and talk to them again. They've always loved you as their own and keep asking about you. I know you miss them too.'

The spoon dropped from my hand and landed with a loud tinkling noise on the tiled floor.

*

'What's wrong?' asks Henry.

'Nothing,' I reply.

'Come on – tell me. Please.'

'Do you think they'll like me?'

'Of course they will. They'll love you.'

'I just wish I knew what to say to them or how to behave.

I've never been formally introduced to a boy's parents yet.' *Because I've never had a serious boyfriend before.*

'And I've never taken a girl home to my parents either. You see, we're in the same boat. Don't worry. It's going to be fine. Just be yourself,' he says, squeezing my hand.

Be myself. I'd probably get on their nerves if I tried to be *myself*. I always talk so much nonsense when I'm nervous, and even when I'm not.

I feel increasingly uneasy with every step we take towards their house. I knew they lived in Clapham, and when he texted me which bus stop to get off, he said he'd be waiting for me there. And he was. He's never broken a promise.

A few days ago, when he told me his family would like to meet me and had invited me to dinner on Sunday, I was initially thrilled and said yes. But then, when we'd put down the phone, an awful pain started to grow in my stomach, and it's been agonising ever since. The pain became so unbearable last night that I could barely sleep, and, as a result, when I looked in the mirror this morning, I was greeted by huge purplish-grey bags under my eyes. Fortunately, my brother's girlfriend had spent the night at ours, and I could borrow some of her make-up to try to make them disappear – without much success.

'You look really nice by the way,' he says, but I don't believe him.

I went through my wardrobe three times this afternoon, and even now, I'm not sure I've made the right choice – a blue lace cardigan with a simple black top underneath and a knee-length dark-grey skirt with tights. I must look like an old spinster. My skin feels itchy under the tights, and the skirt feels like it's shrunk at the waist since I last wore it; I can barely breathe.

'There's one little thing though.' His tone is more serious now, like a surgeon's when they're about to tell a patient they've got a terminal illness – I ponder what mine can be.

'You'd better stop biting your lips before they start bleeding. Because if you turn up like that, I'll never convince my parents that you're not a vampire.'

'Ha ha. Very funny,' I say, and stealthily lick my lips and brush them with my fingers to make sure they're presentable.

'Aaand here we are.' He opens the gate to a mid-terrace brick house. A small garden with red flowers surrounds the path leading to the front door.

'I can see your family is a big supporter of the armed forces.'

'It's my mother,' he says almost apologetically. 'She likes poppies. Your hair is just as red as a poppy. And please, Elizabeth, just relax. It's gonna be okay.'

It could be a sign then that his mother will like me; I might remind her of her beloved flowers.

I wait for Henry to open the door, and he gently pushes me inside. Just as he takes my coat, the door at the end of the hallway opens, and a slender forty-something woman appears.

'Hello, Elizabeth, it's so nice to finally meet you. I'm Judy. I've heard so much about you,' she says, wiping her hand on her apron, and before I can say a word, her arms are locked around me, squeezing the air out of me. She kisses me on the cheek, my face completely lost in her thick curly shoulder-length hair. I've yet to meet his dad, but it already seems clear which of his parents Henry gets his looks from.

When she finally releases me, I look down into her eyes, which seem unnaturally big behind her glasses. And I keep smiling back at her, wondering what Henry has been telling them about me.

'I'm really angry with your father,' she says to Henry. 'He's not back yet, but I did remind him this morning that Elizabeth was coming today. He must still be at the pub with Ed watching football. He's a nightmare; he keeps forgetting everything I say. I'll give him a ring now. Dinner will be ready in about fifteen minutes. Henry, show Elizabeth around while I finish up in the kitchen.'

Before she disappears, she smiles at me and pinches my cheek.

'Let's go upstairs first,' suggests Henry, and he lets me climb the stairs before him.

'This is my parents' bedroom.' He opens the first door on the landing just wide enough that I can get a glimpse of the king-size bed and the large wardrobe occupying most of the space. Then comes the bathroom, and after that, to the right, a door with a yellow-and-black danger sign with an exclamation mark on it. Loud music is coming from inside the room, and I recognise the lyrics of an Eminem song, 'Without Me'.

'That's my little brother's. He's a bit special, but nothing to worry about. Best not to disturb him.

'And this is me,' he says, scratching his head at the last door.

I can't wait to look around this room.

As the door opens, I see white walls. Right off the door is a study desk with a blue-and-black swivel chair. A few photos of Henry and his family smile back at me from the shelf above it. Opposite the desk, against the wall, there's a single bed. The duvet is folded in half; the pillow looks as puffy as if it had never been used before. Left of the bed is a large window, letting in the late September sunshine, and there's a built-in wardrobe similar to mine in the far-left corner. Next to the wardrobe, bookcases and shelves stretch back to the door. So many books, DVDs, medals, and cups lie on the shelves, each claiming their rightful place.

'You shouldn't have tidied up for me,' I say, picking up a medal from the shelf, and he frowns. 'Henry Abbott – first place – 2001.' I read the inscription aloud. 'Henry Abbott – first place – 2002; Henry Abbott – second place – 2003. Phew! Only second.' I shake my head reproachfully. 'So how many people did you have to kill for these?'

'Just a couple of Nazi spies.'

'I see. But seriously, what sport are you so good at?'

'Reading people,' he replies with a playful smile.

'Certainly not me,' I say, putting down the trophy. 'And you wouldn't get an award for that.'

'You sure? I know you better than you think.'

'What am I thinking now?'

He narrows his eyes, rubbing his jaw as if thinking hard. 'That you're hungry.'

'How did you know?'

'Told you, I'm good at reading people.'

'Sure. So what sports do you play?'

'I'll let you guess.'

'Fine, you don't have to tell me then.'

'You're cute when you get all upset.'

'I'm not upset.'

'Swimming and running.'

'No killing spies then? Booo-ring.'

'Sorry to disappoint you, miss.'

'I think I'll survive.'

When we get back downstairs, Henry's little brother – who looks like a younger version of Henry, just with a rounder face, brown eyes, and gelled spiky hair – and his father – who must be a similar age to my dad but is somewhat taller and stockier, with already greying hair and glasses – are already sitting around the dining table.

I sit between Henry and his dad, and once dinner is served, we eat in silence.

'Thank you, Mrs Abbott. It was really delicious.' I lick my lips as I finish the last bits of the roast dinner on my plate.

'Just call me Judy, and hang on – I'll bring the pudding now.' She smiles and gets up, then looks back at the table. 'Timothy, don't you dare put your earphones in – and sit up straight on that chair before you fall back.'

'Pudding?' I ask.

'Yes, dear. Apple crumble – Henry's favourite. Hope you like it too. And please don't tell me you're already full.'

'Don't worry, Mum, Elizabeth is never full,' Henry says, winking at me.

I can feel my face going red.

As the dessert is served, his father turns to me. 'So what do your parents do, Elizabeth?'

Henry coughs.

'My father has taken early retirement,' I said, and it was sort of the truth, 'from the fire brigade, and my mum passed away

a few years ago—'

'Oh, dear, we're really sorry. We didn't mean to pry, right, Frank?' she says, casting a disapproving look at her husband.

'It's okay,' I say.

We eat the dessert in silence until Mr Abbott speaks again.

'Elizabeth, are you busy next Sunday morning?'

I shake my head.

'I thought Elizabeth could come to church with us next week,' he suggests, watching everyone's reaction around the table as if to make sure he isn't saying anything wrong this time.

'That's a great idea, darling,' Mrs Abbott says, nodding in agreement, and Mr Abbott's face shows relief.

'I don't think she'd like to come…' Henry tries to argue.

'No, it's fine; I'd love to,' I say with fake enthusiasm. 'What time and which church?'

'The Methodist church, here on the high street at ten,' says Henry's dad.

'Sure, I'll be there.'

After dinner, I say goodbye to Henry's parents, and Mrs Abbott insists he gives me a ride home.

As Henry starts the engine, Louis Armstrong's 'What a Wonderful World' blares from the speakers. He immediately turns down the volume.

'Sorry, it's my dad; he's a big fan of jazz – I can change the channel.'

'It's okay. I honestly don't mind.'

'Are you sure? You look like something's wrong.'

I remain silent until we're driving through Wandsworth.

'So you think I eat a lot?' I blurt it out.

I can tell by his frown that my question has come as a surprise to him, but he quickly composes an answer.

'You clearly didn't need my help finishing that large popcorn last time at the cinema.' Then a few seconds later, he softly brushes my hand. 'You know I was just kidding. There's nothing of you—'

'And why didn't you tell me that your family were Methodist?'

'You didn't ask, and it just never came up.'

'Why do I always have to prompt you? I wish you'd just tell me things.'

'What are you talking about? I *am* telling you things.' He sighs. 'Fine. Do you remember when we went to the National Gallery, and you wanted to skip the section with the religious paintings? I thought religion was a sensitive topic for you.'

'It's true, they aren't my favourite, but I have nothing against religion,' I lie. 'Those paintings just all seem the same to me. They should offer hope, but most just portray suffering, like Christ being crucified or some saint being put through various ordeals. And I'm not sure I buy the idea of angels as chubby little boys with wings.' I pause, allowing him to consider this for a minute. 'I was raised as an Anglican, and we used to go to church every Sunday.'

Until my mother died. Faith departed my family then.

'I see. But don't worry – my parents don't want to convert you.'

'I'm not worried about *that*.'

'Then tell me what's wrong. Please.'

I shrug. 'Nothing.'

'I can see it's not nothing.'

'Okay,' I sigh, 'it's just I have no idea what Methodist people wear to church.'

He laughs. 'Clothes – like everyone else. You know you're the craziest person I've ever met.'

'Thanks.'

'You think too much. Relax. Everything will be okay.'

*

'Why not just invite them to the wedding?' I asked as I reached for the spoon.

I hadn't seen Henry's parents since the funeral, and I tried hard to ignore my phone whenever their names flashed up on the screen. I simply didn't know what to say to them.

'The seating chart has been finalised, but we might be able to squeeze them in if that's what you want.'

'Jeez, Will, stop! I was being sarcastic! No, I don't want to see them, and it's probably best for them not to see me either. Your wedding is on Saturday – why don't you focus on that and stick to sorting your own life? You guys have lived here for over a year, leeching off Dad.'

Will could have easily retorted about which one of us was the bigger leech in the house, but instead, he was lifting his hand. I'd never seen such anger in his eyes before, but I knew (I hoped) he'd never hurt a woman. His hand clenched in the air, but then his palm turned towards his forehead, and his fingers combed through his messy hair.

'I'm sorry, Will; I didn't mean it. I know you guys work hard, and Sarah keeps the household together—'

'Just shut up, Liz. You've said enough.' He left the kitchen, banging the door behind him, and a minute later, I heard the front door slam too. Exhausted, I sank into a dining chair and buried my head in my hands. Jules was right; I was burning my bridges faster than ever.

*

'Where's Will going?' I asked Sarah. I was standing at the living-room window, watching my brother walk down the street with a sports bag on his shoulder.

'To the gym.'

I huffed a laugh but her face remained serious.

'Sorry, I thought you were kidding,' I said, restraining myself. 'Since when does Will go to the gym?'

'He started going a few weeks ago.'

I supposed it was all about looking presentable in the wedding photos. Will used to be lanky, always reminding me of Shaggy from *Scooby Doo* (he'd even had the same hair colour and style too); I'd often teased him about it. But since he and Sarah started living together, he'd worn his hair slightly shorter

and had been gaining weight, though it all seemed to go to one place only: his stomach. He'd started to look like another cartoon character: a giant frog with slim legs and arms but a disproportionately large middle area. I realised I hadn't been paying much attention to Will's physical features in recent months, so I'd missed out on any positive changes that may have occurred. Jules was right – I'd spent way too much time in my room, away from everyone.

Suddenly, Henry came into my mind again – not that he'd ever left my thoughts.

*

'Poppy, are you alright?'

'What did you just call me?' I pant as I lean forward to rest my hands on my knees. My throat feels raw, and my lungs are like squeezed lemons. When Henry asked me the other day if I wanted to go for a run, it seemed such a good idea that I immediately said yes. I was so excited that I even went to buy a pair of running shoes. I'd expected a fight with my father when I asked for money, but when I told him why I needed it, he didn't argue – he smirked instead.

Henry stops too and jogs back to me.

'Just give me… a couple of minutes… and we can carry on… How far… have… we… run?'

'Half a mile maybe,' he says and starts gently rubbing my back with one hand. 'Feeling a bit better now?'

'I'm fine. I'm just a bit out of practice, that's all,' I lie, but I know it'll take me more than just a little practice if I ever want to keep pace with him.

'Here, drink some water. We can rest for a minute.'

'No, I'm ready now,' I say as I take a few sips from his bottle. *Why didn't I think of bringing any water when at all other times I carry a bottle with me?*

'Only if you're sure…'

'I am. A hundred per cent. Let's go.'

I break into a run again. I turn the corner, and it's only as I reach the end of the next street I realise he isn't beside me but several yards behind.

'Are you okay?' I shout and wait for him to catch up.

'You know what, I think I'm just a bit tired today. Preparing for those exams has worn me out,' he says. 'Would you mind if we did this next week instead?'

'Are you sure?'

'Yeah, I'm a bit out of practice too. Let me walk you back home.'

He takes my hand, and we start heading back to my house the way we came. I'm watching his pale face, thinking he's a much better liar than me. I stop, then stand on my tiptoes and press a small kiss to his cool forehead.

'I love you,' I say.

'I love you more, Poppy.'

CHAPTER 8

A PROPOSAL

Sarah was the perfect bride. Unlike otherwise good-natured women who'd turn into modern-day bridezillas as their big day drew closer, she'd remained calm, composed, and sweet at all times (even to me) over the past few months. Her round face beamed even more after she donned her simple dove-white off-the-shoulder empire-line dress.

Will and Sarah had known each other since we were little. Sarah was my brother's childhood love, and Ethan – her brother – was mine. Our 'love' soon ended when their parents decided they'd be better off living separately, and Mrs Hopkins took the kids and moved to live with their grandparents in Bristol.

At the time, I didn't understand why they couldn't live together anymore, so I asked the wisest person I knew: my mum. Was it because Ethan and I had played hide and seek in their shed, and Mr Hopkins got upset with Mrs Hopkins for not finding him? My mother assured me it had nothing to do with that.

My brother met Sarah again when she was accepted to a university in London to study nursing, and they fell in love with each other once more – this time for real. A couple of years ago, Will proposed on holiday in Italy, and they'd been saving for a wedding ever since.

My heart ached again as the wedding bells started ringing in the church. I looked at Will, who was watching Sarah as she walked down the aisle on her father's arm, my brother's

eyes full of tenderness and hopeful expectation, and all I could think was that I'd never get to see that look on Henry's face.

*

'I don't know how to do this,' Henry murmurs under his nose.

I've never seen him nervous before. He's always so calm, and now he's acting so weird. He's been distant and absent-minded all day. *Is he gonna break up with me?*

We're having a candlelit dinner in a small restaurant somewhere along the Seine. I can see the river from the window; the moonlight dances on the water. This is my present from him for my nineteenth birthday; three days in the beautiful City of Lights. He booked a cosy hotel room near the Montparnasse Tower, and we arrived on the Eurostar. He must have been saving hard for this; his parents must also have contributed, maybe more than they'd normally spend on my birthday. I know he hates asking them for money – it makes me feel guilty.

I never thought I'd make it to Paris before I was twenty, but I was wrong. Here I am, or rather *here we are*…

'How to do what?' I ask cautiously.

Henry gets up, opens his jacket, and starts searching for something in his inner pocket. He then pulls out a little black box and lowers to one knee.

'Elizabeth, will you marry me?'

To me, the tears come faster than the words.

'Is it a yes or a no? Or maybe?' he asks.

I pull him up from the floor. 'Yes, yes, yes,' I say (or maybe scream?), locking my arms around him.

When I let him go, he removes the ring from the box and gently slips it on my finger.

I turn my hand towards the light of the candle.

'I'm sorry it's not a diamond, but the stone matches your eyes,' he says.

'It's perfect. Thank you.'

*

'You shouldn't drink so much.' My father's voice sounded rather sharp behind me.

'Oh, really? Look who's talking?' I laughed bitterly. 'You should be happy that we have something in common now.'

I turned to face him. He opened his mouth as if to speak again but changed his mind, shaking his head. My father wasn't a big man, but he seemed even smaller to me as he limped away.

Unfortunately, I hadn't drunk enough not to realise how mean I'd been to him and regretted my harsh words immediately. But it was too late. For a second, I felt ashamed, but then I didn't know why I was even bothered about it after all those years of war between us. *Why should another insult matter?*

'Bring me another one!' I ordered, grabbing the young waiter's arm as he passed. Then I picked up the name card in front of me: '*Josephine*' – never heard of anyone by that name.

I dropped the card and moved my gaze to the bouquet of pale pink roses, Sarah's favourite, in the middle of the beautifully laid table – the table I wasn't even supposed to be sitting at. According to the original seating arrangement, I was to sit next to Ethan, but I'd overheard him refer to his stepsister, Cora, as a 'hot chick', which made my stomach turn – he was no longer the lovely little blond boy I'd play hide and seek in a shed with. Also, I just couldn't bring myself to spend any more time near *the newlywed couple*, to see how happy they were, and to see how happy I could have been with *Henry*… one day.

That was how I'd settled at this table, abandoned by the guests it had been laid out for. They'd either left already or become part of the idiotic crowd on the dance floor.

I started playing with the empty glass, turning it back and forth between my fingers. The crystal showed me the reflection of a young woman. Despite her perfectly arranged hair, which fell on her shoulders in long waves, and the new navy dress that had cost her a fortune, she seemed to be the only person in the room who wasn't having a good time.

'May I?' asked a deep and mellow male voice.

I shrugged without even looking up.

'Bride or bridegroom?' the man asked after taking the seat next to me.

'Bridegroom – and you?'

'Business.'

I raised an eyebrow at the word and allowed myself to take a better look at him. He was perhaps in his mid-twenties, tanned, clean-shaven, his smooth black hair cut short, stylish, and pushed back. Under the thick straight eyebrows, his eyes were glowing darkly, a smile hovering over the corner of his lips. He was undoubtedly handsome, and there was something about him, something that put me on edge. He might have been one of Will's weird friends from university or Sarah's distant cousins, but I was sure I'd never seen him before. Although I didn't feel like talking to a complete stranger, despite my cat-and-mouse relationship with my father, I wasn't good at ignoring people. Another weakness of mine, I guess.

'That sounds fun at a wedding,' I said.

'In my job, you have to seize every chance.'

'Sure. So what do you do?'

'I'm a desperate *collector*.'

The way he said the last word sent a slight chill up my spine.

'And what do you collect? Paintings? Antique Greek vases?'

'Darling, it's too early to talk about business.' He smiled. 'We'll have time to do that later. Right now, we should talk about something else. Tell me about yourself.'

'What would you like to know?'

'For example, you could start by telling me what's made you so… *dispirited*,' he said, whispering the last word in my ear, his breath scorching my neck.

I coughed and cleared my throat. 'I'm sorry?'

He pointed to my glass, his face still wearing that endearing smile. 'I've noticed you and whisky are close friends.'

'Yeah, we've become really great friends. If only I'd known earlier what a great friend it could be!'

'Please, I'd like to hear about it.'

'About what? My friendship with whisky?'

He laughed. 'No, silly. I'm just wondering what made you two become such good friends in the first place.'

'Oh.' I turned my head away from him and carried on playing with my empty glass. 'You really don't want to know…'

'Let me guess then! Is it love? Oh, no,' he answered his own question a moment later. Meanwhile, I was beginning to feel like I'd been stripped naked and displayed in a museum so visitors could easily walk around and observe every detail. 'I can see now. It's the exact opposite, isn't it – *death*?'

I stopped fidgeting with the glass.

'Is it somebody who's passed away recently? Someone really close to you? A friend? Or perhaps a *boyfriend*?'

'That's enough please. You'd better leave me alone now,' I said, looking around the room, hoping to see the lazy waiter bringing my drink.

'Why is it so hard for humans to accept another person's death?' he asked, his head in his palm, brooding. My fists clenched. 'You're born, you have some time to enjoy your insignificant existence, and then you die. The natural sequence of life. Every human knows it; still, they seem so shocked when one of them passes on.'

'Why are you doing this to me? Do you enjoy causing me pain?'

'All I want is to help.'

'No one can help me. Least of all *you*!'

He lifted my chin gently, and instead of pulling away from him, I felt compelled to look deep into his eyes.

'You're wrong,' he said. 'I can.' He stood up, placing his suit jacket on the back of his chair. Then he offered me a hand. 'A dance? Let the fun begin.'

My lips formed the word 'no', but my hand automatically reached for his. His touch was hot; it almost burned my skin. I held his gaze as he led me to the middle of the dance floor, relieved when the band started to play something slow. Feeling

disoriented from the whisky, I was sure I couldn't dance to a more rhythmic piece.

When he put a hand on my waist, my whole back warmed up in an instant. Soon, he held me even tighter, pressing his chest against mine. I could feel how hard his shoulder was underneath the white shirt that hugged his upper body. Yet, his strength didn't come from his athletic build; it came straight from his eyes, and every time I wanted to look away, they lured mine right back.

'Do you believe in God?'

His question took me by surprise.

'I used to, but I don't know what to believe in anymore,' I said, making sure I didn't step on his feet.

'I can't blame you for that. Your God lets everybody down. And still humans keep praying and praying and never get anything in return. How dull!' he sighed. 'Poor little humans, it must be very frustrating that the long hours you spend going to church and saying your little prayers every evening before bed is just a waste of time.' Then he added, 'But if you believed he existed, you must have believed in the existence of the other one.'

'The other one?'

'Yes, the other one – you know, the *bad* one,' he said. 'At least, you think he's bad. However, the truth is that he does far more favours for you than your little *Lord* has ever done. He's extremely generous compared to the God you all worship.'

'Wait… are you talking about…? Do you mean the *Devil*?'

Only now did I notice his eyes had turned coal black. They were glowing with some unearthly fire as I said the word 'Devil', as if it amused him.

'I've always thought I'd get into Hell, but I'd never imagined Satan would send someone for me. So who are you – or what are you?'

'I'm one of the most faithful servants of my master. Just an ordinary demon if you like. Maybe a touch more than ordinary.' He winked at me.

'And I suppose you're here to take me with you now…'

He laughed. 'Not so fast. Take it easy, Elizabeth. As I said, my master's willing to help you *humans*. And like him, I'd love to help you. But of course, everything has its price…'

I'd had enough. I stopped dancing, breaking loose from his arms.

'Is this some kind of sick joke?' I asked. 'Did my brother put you up to this? Some sort of live entertainment show as a pre-birthday present or what? Or is he punishing me for something I've done to him? Is it because I said no to being a bridesmaid?' Will had a dark, twisted sense of humour, but I'd never have imagined he could be this cruel to me, especially on his wedding day.

'No one asked me to come to you, but I can assure you that I can help you.'

'That's enough! You can stop now, and you can tell Will that your… *performance* was hilarious, I enjoyed it very much, and I hope he had a great time too, making all this up. I didn't think he had such a fertile imagination, but I must admit he's really outdone himself this time. He almost managed to make a complete fool of me. But I'm sorry, guys – I still haven't drunk that much. And now if you'll excuse me…'

He grabbed my wrist firmly.

'Let me go. It isn't funny anymore.'

'I can see you don't have much faith, but you'd better trust me because I can help you. I really can.' He held my gaze for a long second before releasing my arm. I was surprised no one seemed to notice the scene and come to my rescue, as if we were invisible to the other guests… or perhaps they were just too busy having a drunken good time.

'Oh my God, you're so good. You're terrific. You obviously have some talent. How much did my brother pay you for this? Are you a real actor? Tell me, what West End show can I see you in?'

'For the last time, I'm not playing a role. I have an offer for you, but before we discuss the details, I'd like to remind you that nothing is free.'

'You really think you're a demon or whatnot, don't you?' I was actually beginning to feel sorry for him. 'Poor man, you'd better have yourself examined. You're in dire need of medical care. I think there's a psychiatric hospital about fifteen minutes away. I can give you directions.'

His face hardened, and his lips pressed together, but he forced a smile again. 'I wish I could introduce some of my rather satisfied clients to you to prove I'm not lying.'

He was looking around the room as if searching for something or someone, and soon his eyes settled on a distant point. As I tried to follow his stare, my eyes paused at the table where Will and Sarah were sitting. My father had left them, and the newly married couple were chatting with Sarah's stepsister and a few other guests. They looked exhausted. However, Cora was still full of life, talking enthusiastically about something.

She was as beautiful as always. Her chestnut eyes sparkled, and her smooth chocolate hair danced freely around her long sunny face. I suspected some guests must have come just to meet her, the celebrity model who was now also part of the family. The straps of her pale pink maid-of-honour dress slipped down her slender shoulders as she gestured. She adjusted them, and that was when our eyes met. I turned away quickly before the bewildered expression on her face could turn into pity, like everyone else whose gaze I'd caught tonight.

'However,' he said, turning his face back to me, 'I can't find anyone who'd willingly tell you how I've made their dreams come true. So sorry, dear Elizabeth. Perhaps we can do introductions with them another time. I propose we return to our business.'

'I can't imagine what business we might ha—'

'Oh, but it's simple. You tell me what would cheer you up – because you must agree that you aren't content right now – and I'll give it to you.'

'I'm afraid you're a little late with that. But I'm still convinced that the psychiatric hospital would welcome you even this close to midnight.'

He smiled again. This time, however, it was frightening.

'Look around,' he said, adding a 'please' when I didn't move. 'And *now* tell me if you still think I'm insane.'

I bit my lower lip painfully, thrilled with an uncanny fear, and started to scan the room. My vision was a bit blurry by this point, but I was sure the room hadn't changed much. The lights were still on but slightly vibrating, and the same people remained around us. Yet he was right; something was different.

I looked at my brother's table, relief washing over me when I saw everyone there looked normal. The only difference was that it wasn't Cora but my new sister-in-law who was the centre of attention. I guessed she must have said something funny because everyone was laughing.

Then I realised that although Sarah's mouth was open as if to say something, she seemed frozen. The others at the table weren't moving either, and the band had stopped playing. There was silence. Dead silence.

I looked around; every annoying guest seemed to have stopped moving, simply hovering above the point where they'd once been dancing.

The lack of music… the people not moving…

I felt completely sober, and my pulse started to race. My mind searched frantically for a rational explanation for what was happening. But there was none. Everyone was petrified, as if time had stopped around us. And I came to the frightening conclusion that there was no one else left 'awake' in the room but me… and *him*.

'What have you done to them?' I hissed, grabbing the collar of his shirt.

'Are you starting to believe me now?'

'Undo it! Now!'

'Don't get upset; they're fine. Let's do our business first. Then everything will be as it was. Or not.' He smirked.

I let his shirt slip from my fingers and took a deep breath. 'Then tell me what you want from me?'

'It isn't about what I want from you, but what I can give you.'

His calm and friendly tone provoked me even more. 'And what *is* it you think you can give me?'

'Silly child, you still don't understand why I came here.'

'Then enlighten me please.'

'I'm here to help you. You can ask anything that would make you feel better. Anything you've ever dreamed about.'

'What if I don't want to feel better?'

'That's not true, and we both know that. You can't lie to me. I'm able to see right through you.' He poked my chest and added, 'Into the heart of you. And I know what you desire the most. But it has to come from you. You have to say it out loud, yourself. I can't do it for you.'

I'd wanted only one thing during the past seven and a half months, and now I had the chance to make it come true.

'Can you bring him back?' I asked. 'Are you really able to do that?'

'If that's what you want the most—'

I nodded.

'All you have to do is wish.' He paused for a second. 'So what's your wish – exactly?'

'I want him back. I want him to be here again with me, alive. And I want him to be happy.'

His face hardened. 'Are you sure you want *that*? Are you sure you're the one who can make him happy?'

He was right. What if I couldn't? What if I simply didn't deserve to be with him? He died once because of me. I couldn't let that happen again. If I'd never returned his book, if I'd never read his note… *he could still be here*. He could be happy somewhere – without me. He'd never think of me, he wouldn't miss me, he'd never start to look for me if… And I wouldn't miss him either…

'Is it your final wish?'

'No. Wait,' I said. 'I've changed my mind.'

'All you have to do is to say it.'

'I wish Henry and I'd never met.'

'Smart girl,' he said. 'But as I told you before, everything has its price.'

'What is it you want?'

'Just one tiny thing.' His eyes glowed, red and sparkling, as he added, 'Your soul.'

I swallowed hard, but I wasn't afraid. 'You can take it. It isn't worth much anyway.'

'Oh, but it is. It's worth a lot to my master. But let's talk about the deadline first.'

'Deadline?'

He laughed. 'Oh, darling, you can't have thought that I'd take your soul today. I'll come for that in due course when you die, but we must discuss how many years you can still spend here on Earth.'

'You can take my soul right now.'

'You know, I've seen so many people asking for just one more day when their time is up. To show how generous I am, I'll give you five years.'

'I don't need years.'

'Alright.' He let out a sigh. 'Let it be a year then.'

'I really don't need that much time. I'd be happy to follow you to Hell right now.'

'Oh, silly, silly child. I know humans well enough to know you'd regret it if I didn't give you any time.'

'But…'

He placed his index finger over my mouth. 'Believe me, you'd feel remorse that you hadn't asked for more time when you could,' he said, pulling his finger slowly from my lips. 'But before I can give you that, we must arrange some paperwork.'

I raised an eyebrow at the last word.

He pulled out a long, rolled-up piece of thick paper from his trouser pocket. It was like a magic trick, as the scroll was much longer than his pocket. And when he unrolled it, the parchment glowed like gold, outshining everything in the vast room. It was so blinding that I had to turn my head away for a second. Then the brightness faded, and he produced a pen from his other pocket and offered it to me.

'I'll tell you what to write as soon as you're ready. Remember,

I can't do it for you,' he said.

I nodded, accepting the pen. It was a plain fountain pen. I looked at him, waiting while he held the paper out to me.

'I, Elizabeth Jane Maynard…' he dictated, and I placed the tip of the pen on the sheet, hesitating a moment before I started to put it down. As I wrote the first word, my hand started to ache, like I'd been writing for hours. I pressed my lips together, trying to ignore the pain.

'… born 23 March 1989, wish that I and Henry John Abbott, born 11 November 1986, had never met,' he continued.

I tried to keep pace with him, but my wrist was in tremendous pain. He then dictated the date, 19 March 2011, that my soul would become his master's property. I felt so weak I had to stretch my fingers before noting the last bit. My hand was so white, as if there wasn't a drop of blood left in it. I looked at the pen, the parchment, and the pen again, then the pulsating vein on my wrist… and shot a horrified look at him.

'Yes, that's right. The pen is using your blood,' he said. 'The contract must be written in blood.'

I lifted the pen again to sign the contract. Once I put my name on the paper, another sentence appeared at the bottom. I took a step back to read the curling letters.

The deal is made.

He released the paper, but it didn't fall; it soared into the air until all the letters started to glow. Then the parchment incinerated into golden dust in an instant.

He smiled. 'Now the contract has become part of my collection. I'll come to you at midnight on this day next year. And I must warn you – don't try to hide. I *will* find you, wherever you are.' It sounded like a threat rather than a simple warning.

He turned his back on me and was about to walk away when he stopped. 'Oh, I almost forgot.' He waited until I raised my head before he continued, smiling again. 'Happy birthday when it comes, and I hope you enjoy your year.' He then dissolved into thin air.

The moment he vanished, the band started playing again, and the guests danced and chatted as if nothing had happened.

Feeling dizzy and exhausted, I wiped my eyes. All I could see was blurred forms. I took a few steps then fell. I grabbed at a tablecloth, but it jumped out of my hands, and a woman shrieked. I tried to mumble a 'sorry', but the word failed me. I started crawling across the cold floor, but before I could reach my table, everything went black.

PART 2

'For he shall give his angels charge over thee, to keep thee in all thy ways.' Psalm 91:11

CHAPTER 1

AFTER LIFE

I didn't need to open my eyes to know I was awake. The headache was so agonising it was impossible for it to be part of a dream. *Painkiller please – someone give me a painkiller*. And then I heard footsteps, the lights came on, and the feeling of nausea settled in my throat.

'Turn them off please,' I moaned, pulling the pillow over my head.

'What are you talking about?'

I peeked out from under the pillow, and Jules stared back at me. She stood at the window, her hands still arranging the blackout curtain. She was fully dressed, wearing subtle make-up, the fuchsia lipstick days long gone…

'What are you doing here?' I murmured.

'It's almost midday,' she said. 'Didn't you say you had to be at the shop by one?'

'I'm not feeling well.'

'You shouldn't have had those tequila shots last night.'

'It wasn't my idea to go out with Steve and his friend,' I said. 'You know blind dating's really not for me.'

'I don't think there's a danger of that happening again.'

'Oh my gosh. Tell me I just imagined it, and I didn't—'

'Oh, yeah, you did. And Jeremy said it was a very expensive jacket. Armani, if I remember correctly. But don't worry, Steve managed to dissuade him from sending you the dry-cleaning bill.'

'Why does Steve have to have such posh friends?'

'Do you mean it's his fault you were sick all over that jacket, or would you have preferred it to have been from Burton?'

I was going to say, 'I'd have preferred it to have been from Primark,' but Jules put her hands on her hips, indicating she wasn't up for a joke, so I decided to go with the truth.

'No, I just don't feel comfortable chatting to someone whose outfit for a night out costs more than my entire wardrobe. Anyway, what time did you say it was?'

'It's five past twelve,' Jules said, glancing at her watch.

'Shite!' Headache or not, I was fully awake then and kicked off the duvet and rushed into the bathroom. I didn't have time to jump in the shower, so I just washed my face and my armpits quickly. My hair needed a wash too, but I just pulled it into a ponytail for now. I sniffed it and found it actually wasn't too bad.

'It might be a good idea to put on some clothes too,' Jules pointed out when I was slipping into my shoes in the hall.

I took a deep breath, removed my pumps, and rushed back to my bedroom.

'You may need these.' Jules handed me a pack of mints and my keys when I returned, finally appropriately dressed for work.

'Thanks – I almost forgot,' I said, leaning in for a hug, but she pushed me away.

'Oh my God, you're still drunk. Just go!'

I arrived at the supermarket on time, but my head was still throbbing, and I felt like I was trapped in a bad dream. The dream turned even worse when I was paired with Ian Adkins to stack shelves. Ian was a tall, chubby guy with dark reddish-brown hair parted in the middle and large freckles scattered all over his face. Hunched over a carton of tinned cat food, he was screwing up his face and sniffing, which made his thick-framed glasses slide up and down.

'You're so good at this,' he said, handing me a couple of tins. 'Much faster than I am. And I really like how you colour-coordinated the shampoos the other day. They should make you a supervisor.'

'Thanks, Ian, but we've talked about this. I'm only here twenty-five hours a week. And no matter how much I love sacrificing my free time to serve unhappy and demanding customers, I really don't think becoming a supervisor here is an option for me.'

I indeed very much hoped that after finishing my master's, I'd get a full-time job somewhere else. I'd have applied for internships in marketing, but they didn't pay much (if anything), and I'd have done anything to avoid moving back home.

'Oh, okay,' he said and screwed up his nose again. 'By the way, you look really pretty today.'

'Thanks.'

'Erm… you remember that comedy-drama you mentioned last time. Erm… I was thinking about going to the cinema to see it tonight.'

'I'm sure you'll like it. Have fun.'

'I thought… erm… that you might want to come with me.'

'I can't, sorry. Not tonight.'

'Cool, no worries.'

I did feel sorry I had to decline his offer; under different circumstances – out of pity – I might have said yes… But I wasn't lying. I did have plans for the evening. It was my turn to make dinner, do the dishes, and sort the laundry, and I somehow had to fit in some studying too. As Jules and I were rarely at home at the same time, we'd take turns using the only computer desk in the flat. At least, that's how we explained positioning the desk in the living room. In reality, it was because the two almost-equal-sized bedrooms didn't have space to accommodate much more than the double beds and storage units that had already been there when we moved in. And the truth was we rarely ever used the desk (but we'd never admit to wasting money on purchasing it). We both preferred spreading out with our books and paperwork on the sofa and the large glass coffee table in front of it. Neither of us cared about the mess as long as we tidied up afterwards. Jules preferred the quiet, but I liked

to put the TV on or play a CD for some background noise; it made me feel less lonely and isolated. I knew it was silly, but it also made me feel safer – as if I could turn to the actors, news presenters, or rock stars for help should someone try to break in and hurt me.

In the flat, it wasn't just the coffee table that was made of glass but the TV stand too. The rest of the minimalist furniture, like the bed frames and shelving units, was a combination of metal and wood, paired with a colour scheme consisting of black, red, and white – which, of course, reflected neither mine nor Jules' taste.

The flat belonged to her twin brothers, who'd wanted to let it out when they were leaving for Cyprus last year. She'd convinced them that she and I (being, erm, responsible adults) were a far better option than renting to strangers – they could leave all the furniture in place, assured that their property would be in good hands. And the only thing they had to keep in storage was their collection of sports magazines, clothes, and a foosball table that Jules and I'd replaced with a bistro table and two matching chairs – again, something we never used, as we typically ate alone on the sofa.

Putney wasn't a cheap place to rent in, but Jules was a natural-born negotiator, and she managed to get a price well below market rate from her brothers. Otherwise, we'd have had to stay with our families, go back to house-sharing with multiple others, or try something else on campus. Neither of us liked any of those options.

As we both found the colour of the red leather sofa incredibly annoying and the white walls too sterile, we'd covered the sofa with a light brown throw and colourful patterned pillows. And we'd hung a mixture of framed calming landscapes and Buddhist mandalas on the walls (using Blu-Tack and nail-free hangers of course) and laid old rugs on the dark laminate flooring, making it our own little nest. The result was colourful, but the tones weren't harsh – or not harsh enough to distract one from studying.

After finishing all my chores, I put on *Pretty Woman*, sat down with a cup of hot milk and honey, and started to look through my notes on digital marketing. I was bending over books until the film finished, about to fall asleep. I'd always found Richard Gere's voice one of the best lullabies. When I was studying, my mind blocked out most noises; having the TV on was more of a reflex now for me, so this time it wasn't the millionaire Edward Lewis who was rocking me to sleep but exhaustion from my busy schedule.

When I wasn't working my butt off at the supermarket, I was at university. When I wasn't at lectures or in the library researching an assignment, I was doing chores or studying. Between everything, I was trying to make time to live life to the fullest, like any twenty-one-year-old would have – or so I thought. But something always seemed to be missing, and I could never put my finger on exactly what it was… But I could have done with a real-life person sitting next to me on the sofa instead of relying on celebrities to jump off the screen and run to my rescue…

CHAPTER 2
REMEMBRANCE

I'd never felt so free as when I opened my bedroom window and took a deep breath of the crisp October air. The sky was clear, and there wasn't yet much movement on the streets below. I decided the weather was perfect to stretch my legs and go for a nice jog before work.

'What are you looking for?' Jules asked as she passed my door.

'My running shoes. Have you seen them?'

'Didn't know you had a pair… Since when do you go running anyway?'

I immediately stopped rummaging through the wardrobe. 'I… Never mind,' I said, confused.

Jules kindly offered her tennis shoes, which I accepted. She wore a size bigger than me, but I pulled the laces tight so they wouldn't feel wobbly on my feet. My footwear collection appeared limited to a couple of pairs of comfy pumps, ballerina shoes, and one pair of black strappy, closed-toe heeled sandals that would generally go with anything.

'Maybe we could go shopping soon?' she asked. 'We haven't been hanging out a lot recently, just me and you.'

'It's because when I work, you don't, and when you work, I'm off. My rota is fixed, but surely you could speak to your mum about changing your hours slightly or just giving you the odd day off.'

'I could… but she'd think I was moaning. And Georgios Jr and Antonios have families to work around. I don't,' she

said, referring to her two elder brothers, who still worked in the Kastros' restaurant. The twins, Stefan and Kostas, had also been working in the family business before they'd left for Cyprus to reconnect with their roots, resulting in Jules having more work piled on her. She never complained though – she'd been raised to be tough and tried to pass her resilience on to me every time I moaned about not being able to cope with something. Sometimes that reality check was exactly what I needed to pull myself together, but I didn't always appreciate her direct approach.

When the twins left for Cyprus, her mum had brought in one of Jules' distant cousins to help out, but he hadn't proved to be as efficient as her own children. And Mrs Kastro was reluctant to hire any outsiders. Unfortunately (or fortunately for Jules and me), the twins had enjoyed the visit to their homeland so much that they'd decided to open a bar on the beach and stay in the sun for a little longer than originally planned.

'Speaking of work, I've gotta go; I'm already late,' she said. 'Mum won't be happy. See you later.'

After she was gone, I too grabbed my keys, MP3 player, and water bottle and left the building.

I took another deep inhale and started jogging down the street. The air was chilly, so I moved faster to warm up. To my surprise, I found my body, which had avoided most physical activities in my teenage years, very cooperative.

After a couple of hundred yards, I stopped to rest, bending down towards my knees, but I realised my breathing was fine. I broke into a sprint and pushed myself to carry on at an even pace around the block. When I returned to my starting point, I hadn't even broken a sweat, so I attempted a second round, this time running briskly and venturing even further. When I reached a nearby park, I sprinted from one entrance to another, then back the way I came.

When I got back, having the flat to myself, I stripped naked in the kitchen and put my sweaty clothes straight in

the washing machine. As I headed for the bathroom, I passed the full-length mirror on the hallway wall and stopped for a minute. It seemed such a long time since I'd last taken a good look at myself. I usually undressed in the bathroom, and the only mirror was a tiny round one set on the windowsill above the sink.

It wasn't an awkward teenager looking back at me anymore – the sight I'd been so used to before – but a curious young woman. I suddenly realised how much I'd changed in the past few years: my body was still lean, my stomach as flat as if I'd been regularly working out, but the most pleasing change was that my breasts had finally caught up with the rest of my body, and as with Jules, my hips didn't look so flat and boxy anymore. My once round face had grown more angular, though some childish puffiness had remained. My small lips seemed slightly fuller, my nose a bit more pointed, and my eyes weren't shining with that youthful excitement and innocence anymore. My once bushy eyebrows had been tamed into a neat thick line. The small number of freckles I used to have had faded on my nose and cheeks, and finally (thank God), my hair had learned how to behave.

'Who are you?' I asked my reflection, but she didn't deign to reply.

*

'Let's go in here,' said Jules, pulling me into a jewellery store. Despite her protest a couple of weeks earlier, she must have spoken to her mother and arranged to get the same (half) day off as me so we could go shopping on Oxford Street. One of our goals had already been accomplished at Sports Direct, and I was proudly carrying a bag containing the new running shoes I'd acquired at a bargain price.

'What did you want to look at? Engagement rings?' I asked, grinning, as I stepped towards the display units, but she'd barely moved from the door.

'Shh. Can you be quiet for a minute please? Just trying to save you,' she said, peering out through the shop window. 'I hope Mike didn't see us.'

'Who's Mike?'

'You went on a date with him five weeks ago. You even commented on his eyes!'

'Oh, that Mike! Yes, he did have lovely hazel eyes…' I said as I recalled our dinner date. 'But he was the one who almost forced himself on me when I was trying to say goodnight.'

'Steve did admit he gets a bit pushy when he drinks. But I don't think your ideal man exists anyway. Perhaps you need to consider lowering your standards.'

'How do you know what my ideal man is like?' I asked. Even I didn't know that. 'And how low exactly should my standards be?'

'The coast seems clear now; let's go.'

'So come on,' I said as we walked towards Marble Arch, 'what do you think I'm looking for in a man?'

'All I'm saying is that you've had six dates in the past four months, and you found something wrong with each of them. Not one of them was good enough for you.'

It was true; none of them were right for me. The first one, Aidan, I only met because she'd made me sign up for a dating site, and he'd turned out to be working for the site. It was a bit bizarre. But it explained why he'd messaged me less than a minute after I'd joined. Clearly, I was just fresh meat.

The second one was the very unfortunate-looking Rob, who'd only wanted to talk about his mother. The third one was called Jim, but I could barely remember the date itself apart from his constant sneezing. The fourth one, Aaron, was a computer geek, who had agoraphobia and wanted us to have a picnic in a lift. The fifth one was Mike, and then Jeremy, the sixth, could only talk about how much money his company made and how he enjoyed firing people. I assumed the last one had been made into a double date only to test that I was actually giving these guys a chance and not running off after five minutes.

'I appreciate you're trying to help. But can you please stop trying to set me up with the undateable?'

Jules pulled a face but remained quiet.

'Seriously, how come Steve has such rich friends?' I'd asked her before, but she'd never answered.

'You know how it is – his older brothers have a lot of mates too, and Steve knows most of them.'

'That explains why half of them were pushing forty. I don't mind an age gap, but can we please limit that to men who weren't in secondary school when I was a baby? I'm not looking for a sugar daddy. Jim was probably the youngest, but even he looked near thirty-five.'

'Jim's actually one of Steve's clients.'

'You mean that guy has a dog?' I found that hard to believe due to his various allergies.

'No, it's not the dog-grooming business – it's the other one Steve knows him from,' she said and waved a hand.

'The construction job?'

'No, the other one.' She waved again. 'Steve's done some DJing at some weddings.'

'You mean the guy you made me go on a date with was married?'

'God, no!' she said. 'He was divorced, I think, or separated at least by then…'

'Well, thank you for telling me. But no wonder they didn't stay together. I almost fell asleep during dinner with him. Poor woman! What have I ever done to you to put me through that ordeal?'

'If you must know, Jim called Steve a couple of months ago about some company party he was organising. He said he'd thought of Steve because of how good he'd been at the wedding, and it came up that Jim was single again.'

'That's great, but so you know: just because someone is single, it doesn't mean you guys automatically need to introduce him to me. Have you seen Jim?'

'I trust Steve.'

I shook my head in disbelief. 'Clearly, there needs to be a better vetting system before you two matchmakers send these guys my way.'

'So are you saying that after your moaning session, you're still open to more blind dating?'

'You're right, forget it,' I said. 'Just stop the meddling altogether. And let's hope God will send me someone soon – I hate being the third wheel.'

'You're not a *third wheel*!'

'Then why are you so adamant about setting me up with someone?'

'Because it'd be good for you. You need to get out more often. Apart from university and work, you hardly ever leave the flat. You don't even visit your family anymore. It's not healthy to lock yourself up when you should be enjoying life. You're twenty-one… You don't want to think back when you're older and regret all the missed opportunities.'

I was sure I'd heard a similar pep talk before about life being too short…

'I'm just too busy right now to date, and you're wrong: I do visit my family,' I said, which was a lie, and her sceptical expression told me she knew it too. I did miss my brother, but apart from holidays and birthdays, I avoided going home because I didn't want to see Dad. 'And you're right. I'm *only* twenty-one, and that's exactly why I'm not in a rush to get married like you guys.'

'Rubbish. If I have time for Steve, you'd have time for someone. Don't forget you're the one who keeps complaining about how lonely you feel going to the cinema on your own. And technically, Steve hasn't even proposed yet, so there's no wedding on the horizon.'

She was probably right – I could have squeezed a man into my life, someone who'd take me to nice restaurants, treat me with flowers and compliments, and appreciate films and art as I did. But not the men they'd introduced me to. Or perhaps she was right about my standards being too high. Maybe I was the

problem, not my dates.

'Then why are you talking about kids already?' I asked, instead of admitting defeat.

'Just because we talk about the future doesn't mean anything is set in stone.'

'You don't want to marry him?'

'I didn't say that, but if Ryan Gosling asked me first, I wouldn't say no.'

'Does Steve know he's got such strong competition?'

'Just because I love Steve doesn't mean I have to shut my eyes when a handsome man walks into the room.'

'You do know that there's a very, very slim chance of that man being Ryan Gosling?'

'A girl can dream,' she sighed. 'Anyway, where next?'

'I thought we could treat ourselves to lunch.'

'Good idea. I fancy some sushi.'

'You always want sushi! Sometimes I wonder whether you're really Cypriot or Japanese.'

We settled on eating at Wasabi, which satisfied us both – her eating her beloved raw fish and me eating a good portion of spicy curry.

'I don't know how you can eat that much. I couldn't fit through the door if I ate what you eat. Your metabolism must be a lot better than mine.'

My thin frame was the only good thing I'd inherited from my father. My mother had been curvier and slightly heavier built, though with a slim waist, and beautiful – turning-heads beautiful, Marilyn Monroe beautiful, though she didn't need to wear a lot of make-up, and her hair wasn't short platinum blond but long, dark auburn (unlike my fiery red madness). Her laugh was infectious, and when she spoke, it sounded like a soft melody – in contrast to my plain voice and laugh, which still sounded too childish to me.

'I'll burn it off later at work,' I said. 'And I don't think I'll have any dinner after this. But I can't live on salads and rabbit food like you do; I'd have zero energy.'

'I'd eat anything, but you know my skin can't tolerate oily food.'

I thought of her mother's cooking and wondered how she'd survived nearly twenty-two years without spots…

After the early lunch, we took the Tube back to Putney. I was heading straight to work while she was going back to the flat to drop off our shopping before reporting for duty at the restaurant. We'd agreed to repeat our girly day in a few weeks.

After we came out of the underground station, we found the road had been cordoned off, and we could barely squeeze ourselves through the crowd standing in front of the gates. When we'd finally got past the masses of people, I saw it: a little red flower pinned to the folded-down collar of a black coat. And I heard a young man's voice calling, 'Poppy.' It was Remembrance Day; there were red poppies everywhere, and I wondered how I'd missed them before. A mid-terrace house appeared in my head, with a half-height brick wall and a wooden gate in front of it, poppies covering the front garden.

'Poppy,' called the voice again, and I looked around to see where it had come from. Near me, there were only older people standing, not a young face in sight.

The third time I heard the man, his voice was fading, and I realised he was only in my head, just like the picture of that house had been. I didn't waste my time looking around again.

'Hey, Liz, can you hear me? Are you okay?' Jules was looking at me, concerned. She'd put a hand on my shoulder.

I slowly nodded.

'You look like you've seen a ghost,' she said.

And I felt like I had.

CHAPTER 3

HOT AND COLD

'Do you come here often?' asked the young man staring up at me from the wooden bench below. He seemed about the right age and was pleasant-looking enough, though not to my taste.

'Sometimes.' I smiled politely, trying to suppress a sneeze. I was still recovering from a nasty cold I'd caught two weeks earlier.

I'd taken Jules on a spa day for her birthday. She'd been complaining about not having enough girly time with me again, so I thought what could be better than a relaxing day without men, just the two of us. But I was starting to regret coming here due to the unwanted attention I'd received since we'd arrived. First, the spa receptionist, then this man…

'I like it here. It always helps me get rid of the stress,' he said.

I smiled and nodded at him. He was heavier built, with pale skin, no tattoos, a perfect haircut and smooth hands with short chubby fingers. I immediately decided that he must spend his working hours sitting in an expensive suit in the city, occasionally pressing the keyboard on his laptop and attending meetings where nothing was ever decided, yet never missing a chance to complain about how hard he was made to work by his tyrant boss. To top it all, he was probably unhappy because he felt he deserved a pay rise to bolster his already handsome salary.

I scolded myself for being so judgemental, but I'd met too many of his kind through Jules and Steve.

Feeling guilty, I almost told the man I was there to get rid of my cold when he spoke again.

'Just realised that the hourglass hasn't moved – did you girls set it when you came in?'

'No,' I said.

He stood up and turned the hourglass upside down.

'Speaking of time, it's great that tomorrow is only Sunday,' he continued, sitting back on the lower bench. 'The weekend is the best part of the week, isn't it? Do you work Monday to Friday?'

I shook my head – my moment of guilt was over. I pulled up my legs and leaned against the wooden backrest, closing my eyes to enjoy the dry heat.

A few minutes later, I heard the glass door shut.

'What the hell was that?' asked Jules.

'What?' I said, opening my eyes. And finally, I let the sneeze out. It was now only the two of us left in the Finnish sauna.

'Is that what you call flirting?'

'Flirting?'

'You are terrible. That guy liked you, and you drove him away!'

'No I didn't. He asked me a few questions, and I replied.'

'I can't believe it!'

'What are you talking about?'

'It's fine if you don't want my help, but that was the fourth time this week I've seen a young, good-looking man trying to approach you, and you just shut yourself up,' she said. 'Ice queen, that's what you are!'

'You mean if a man smiles at me and talks to me, there's a possibility they want to ask me out?' I asked innocently.

'It's not funny.'

'I think it is,' I said, trying not to smile. 'And that was the sixth or seventh time this week. There were a couple of customers at the supermarket and that foreign exchange student at university I told you about.'

'Oh my God! There's something really wrong with you. Remind me please: when was the last time you were in a relationship?'

I thought for a long minute. I'd had a couple of flings during my undergraduate course, but neither lasted more than three or four dates. Both ended after we'd reached the bedroom. I sighed as I recalled my romance with Alexandre, a French boy. The candlelit dinners and the sleepless nights. Unfortunately, he flew back to Paris following graduation. I visited him once.

On the other hand, Toby was someone I wished to forget… though I still had to see him around the university. In Toby's dictionary, the word 'foreplay' didn't exist, and I felt sorry for the girls he'd been with after we'd stopped seeing each other. Toby's dictionary was limited to three words: football, beer, and pizza.

'Billy Craig, last year of high school,' I said triumphantly. Our relationship lasted four or five months. 'But back then, I didn't have to watch for signs. He told me he liked me and wanted me to be his girlfriend. Why can't men be direct anymore?'

'Billy only needed a girlfriend to convince his parents he wasn't gay. And being direct isn't fun. You need to start playing the game. You'll never go out with anyone unless you develop a strategy.'

Unfortunately, she was right. But I never got to meet Billy's parents. Before that could happen, he'd swapped me for Claudia Kinkle. Probably because she had bigger boobs. He must have thought the bigger boobs his girlfriend had, the more convincing he'd be as a straight man. I didn't understand male logic – though I wasn't sure Billy's logic counted as generic male logic. Anyway, it seemed like I'd end up a spinster.

I sighed. 'I'm not a teenager anymore, and I can't play games and have no strategy.'

'Yes you can. You just need more confidence,' said Jules, patting my shoulder.

'Where do I get that from?'

'Just think: seven men fancied you only this week.'

'Fine, I know I'm not ugly, and I have some brains,' I said, but Jules shot me a dark look, so I quickly added, 'When it's not about men, but seven seems a bit too much for one week…'

'Seven does seem a lot,' she agreed with her thinking face on.

'Thank you for boosting my confidence.'

'Come on – you know what I meant.'

We both fell into silence for a minute before I said, 'Shall we go in the pool? The ice queen is melting now.'

*

'I think you've got another admirer,' said Jules, who was propped up on the sofa. She'd stopped reading her book and was looking out the window.

It was Monday evening, meaning she was due to start work at half six. She'd normally go straight there after university, but as our last lecture had been cancelled, she'd come back to the flat with me so we could enjoy an early dinner together. Because I studied marketing, and her course was accountancy, we shared some classes. It was already five past six, but Jules didn't seem to care what the clock above the TV said, although I'd pointed it out to her a few minutes earlier.

'What are you talking about?'

'There's a guy on the other side of the road looking up at this flat.'

'And? What makes you think he's after me?' I asked. 'He might be *your* fan.'

'Well, for one, he's staring at that window, not this one.' She nodded towards the kitchen window.

I let the sponge and the plate fall from my hands into the bubbles with a big splash and leaned over the sink to pull the lace curtain aside. She was right. The young man was standing under the glow of the lamp post. It felt like he was staring directly into my eyes.

'He hasn't moved for the past twenty minutes,' she added.

'And you're only telling me now? And what on earth is he wearing?'

'Looks like a hospital gown to me.'

'How strange!' I pulled my head back and let the curtain drop.

'Anyway, he can't stay there much longer. It's freezing outside.'

'Bugger,' I said as I squeezed the water from my top.

'What have you done now?'

'Nothing, just need to change my top.' I put the wet jumper in the washing machine, then went to my bedroom and pulled a fresh one from my chest of drawers.

'Is he still there?' I asked when I came back, pulling the jumper over my head.

Jules turned to the window and nodded.

'Where are you going?' she called after me as I slipped into my shoes.

'I'm gonna find out what he's doing,' I replied, putting on my jacket.

'Wait, do you know him?'

'No… don't think so.'

'Then you can't go out there alone,' she said. 'He might be dangerous. I'm coming with you.'

By the time I heard the front door shut behind her, I'd already reached the main entrance of the building.

Outside, it was colder than I'd expected. I crossed my arms, rubbing my shoulders; my jacket wasn't a winter one.

When I crossed the road, the young man's eyes were still fixed on the third-floor window. I saw his body shake and then slowly start to lean backwards. I hurried over and got there just in time to catch him. Although he was thin, I couldn't hold him standing up – I had to kneel, lowering his body with me. I allowed his head to fall on my lap and brushed some hair from his face. His skin was pale, almost bluish and ice cold. For a second, I thought he was dead. Then he half opened his eyes.

'E… li… za… beth,' he whispered then shut his eyes again. He wasn't moving anymore.

'What happened?' Jules asked as she arrived.

'Call an ambulance. Quickly!' I told her, and she rushed back to the building for her phone. Then I looked at the boy in my arms, trying to remember where we could have met, but I was sure I'd never seen him before…

CHAPTER 4

ON A MISSION

'Hi, Steve,' I said as I opened the front door for him. 'Jules will be ready in a minute.'

'Cool, thanks.' He smiled at me and stopped in the hallway, his hands in his pockets. He was dressed unusually smart in cream chinos and a blue checked shirt. Steve was a stocky guy, with short brown hair (now gelled up) and small brown eyes, about the same height as Jules but seven or eight years older. Unlike Jules, Steve did have skin problems (regardless of what he ate), which had left small scars on his face, but his confident manner compensated for any blemishes.

They'd been going out for three years, having met at Jules' family's restaurant, where Steve and his mates had been having dinner one night as a warm-up to a stag do. Jules had been serving them, and he'd been trying out some cheesy pick-up lines on her. In response, she'd 'accidentally' poured some Guinness in his lap. It was hate at first sight.

But Steve didn't give up easily and kept returning to the restaurant with flowers until Jules agreed to go out with him. I think actually Mrs Kastro had pushed her to agree because Steve had been causing too much of a distraction and was thus deemed damaging to the family business.

'I heard about what happened with that guy yesterday,' he said. '*Maad*…'

I nodded.

'Do you know who it was?'

I shook my head.

'You sure you don't mind if we leave you here alone…?'

'Nah, don't worry about me. I'll be alright. Doubt if another fan of mine will turn up tonight. Just enjoy the theatre. I heard the play's had great reviews.'

'Thanks,' he said, and I wondered whether Steve would get the hint from the title of the show, *An Ideal Husband*.

Jules came out of her bedroom wearing a long, simple black dress with a thick metal necklace and large silver hoop earrings; I hadn't seen her wear black in a while. Her hair was tightly pulled back, her lips a deep shade of red.

'You look really nice,' Steve said, smiling as he admired her slender figure.

'Thank you.' Jules turned to me and said, 'You should come with us.'

'I'm honestly fine, but you should go before you miss the first half.'

'As long as you're sure…'

I nodded, and we said goodbye. Then I sat down on the sofa and went back to reading my book – but I had to repeatedly go over the same lines as the words didn't seem to make sense.

Finally, I put down the book and turned on the TV. I kept changing the channels, but nothing held my attention for long.

I looked at my watch: it was only half six. I pulled out my phone and quickly googled where the ambulance would have gone from Putney, as I'd forgotten to ask the paramedics where they'd take the boy. St George's Hospital was the most likely one apparently. Five minutes later, I was on the bus to the hospital. The journey took about half an hour.

'Excuse me,' I said to the receptionist, who'd just finished with a phone call, 'do you know where the young man that was brought in yesterday is?'

'I'm sorry, miss, but we have dozens of new patients every day. Can you please tell me his name, your relationship to him, and what unit he would have been taken to?' Although polite, she sounded tired and somewhat annoyed at my question.

'I'm not sure… I mean… I don't know. But he's blond,

about five feet nine or ten… and skinny, very skinny. Around twenty, twenty-five. He was wearing a hospital gown when they brought him in around half six yesterday evening.'

'I'm sorry, I can't help.'

'Please,' I begged, and she looked at me with a severe expression I was sure had seen off plenty of difficult visitors.

'I'm sorry, but as I said, we have many new patients daily, and if you're not a family member, I can't give you any information.'

Of course she was right. I didn't know why it hadn't occurred to me that they weren't allowed to share confidential information with strangers. *After all, who am I to him?*

Embarrassed, I felt my face grow red as I turned towards the exit. I felt stupid for making the journey in haste. I shouldn't have come all this way; this might not even be the hospital he'd been taken to.

'Psst. *Psst*.'

At first, I didn't realise the hissing noises were meant for me, but when they didn't stop, I looked around to find a middle-aged cleaner near the lift, a mop in his hand, beckoning me to come closer. His name tag read 'Charlie'.

'Hey, I overheard your conversation with Mary. You were asking about that strange boy, weren't you?' he said with a strong accent – Caribbean perhaps – looking sideways suspiciously.

'Are you sure we're talking about the same person?'

'Blond, young lad, skin and bones, big nose, prominent Adam's apple, square jaw,' he recited as if reading a shopping list, keeping his head down as he continued to mop the corridor floor.

I'd never mentioned his nose or Adam's apple or jaw to the receptionist, not because I'd left them out on purpose but because I hadn't paid much attention to his facial features. His nose could have been big, and perhaps he did have a prominent Adam's apple and a square jaw… But, oh well, this cleaner obviously had more refined observation skills than me.

'Think so – what makes you say he's strange?'

He raised his head to peek again, making sure no one was paying attention to us before speaking. 'He'd been in here for the past two or three months or so. Been in intensive care. When he woke up yesterday, he told the doctors to let him go because… *he was on a mission*,' he said, whispering the last few words.

'*On a mission*?' I repeated, probably louder than I should have, because he looked around nervously again before he continued.

'Yes, that's what he said. And when they asked what his name was, he said *he didn't have one*.' He whispered the last part again, opening his eyes wide.

'Amnesia?'

'No, later he told them that the body had a name, or the original spirit of the body or something like that, not him, if they were after that,' he said, shaking his head. '"The body" – I've never heard anyone talk about themselves like that in my fifty-eight years.'

'Can you please tell me where he is now?'

He shrugged. 'He was released early this morning. He seemed better, and some nice older lady came to take him.'

'I see. Do you know where they went, by any chance?'

He shook his head again. 'No, but I know someone who might: Roger. I saw them get in his car.'

'Who's Roger?'

'A cab driver. He should still be outside. I just saw him come back again. He's been stationed here for a few years now.'

'Thanks.'

'Just don't tell anyone you got this from me. I ain't want to get fired.'

'My lips are sealed,' I said, putting my index finger and thumb together and pulling them across my mouth as if zipping it up.

There was a queue of black cabs waiting outside the hospital building. As I stepped closer to the first one, the young driver appeared in front of me and opened the passenger door.

He smiled, flashing his gold tooth. His dark hair was pulled back into a ponytail, and his piercing dark eyes made me feel uncomfortable. I felt like I'd seen them before. For a second I forgot where I was and what I wanted.

'Where would you like to go, miss?' he asked, and I detected an Eastern European accent.

'Are you Roger? I'm looking for Roger.'

'You don't want Roger, miss. I can take you wherever you want to go a lot faster than that old git.'

'But I need to speak to him.'

He eyed me for a long moment then slammed the door when he realised he wasn't getting a customer.

'Fourth one,' he said flatly and got back in his car.

Behind the wheel of the fourth cab, a small grey-haired man was reading *The Times*. When I knocked on the window, he lowered the newspaper and looked at me with mousy eyes over his glasses, chewing on the end of an unlit pipe. The window slowly rolled down.

'Roger?'

'Yeah? Who's asking?'

'Hi, the cleaner in the hospital, Charlie, said you might be able to help me. I'm looking for a friend of mine, and Charlie told me he'd seen him get into your cab this morning. I'd be grateful if you could give me the address you took him to.'

'What does your friend look like?'

I described the boy just as I had to the receptionist and added the details Charlie had mentioned. 'Oh, and he wasn't alone; I think he was with a woman, his mother perhaps,' I added.

'Right,' he said slowly, measuring me up. 'Get in. I'll take you there.'

'Thanks.'

We drove to a residential area of Morden, listening to classical music on the radio, which wasn't my cup of tea, but at least it had filled the silence between us. Only when we stopped did I notice that he hadn't turned on the meter. I asked how much

I owed him, and he said, 'Next time.' Though there wouldn't likely be a next time, and we both knew it.

After getting out of the cab, I realised I didn't quite know what I was doing there. I hadn't prepared at all for this visit. What was I going to say? What did I want to ask him? But if I'd come so far, I decided I might as well knock on the door.

When it opened, I came face to face with a thin fifty-something woman. She had a huge smile on her face, revealing long straight teeth.

'Hello, Elizabeth.'

'Hello. How do you know my name?'

'Nicholas said you might be coming.' She popped her head outside for a second. 'Brr, nah, come in, my dear. It's freezing out here, and it looks like it's going to snow.'

She shepherded me into the first room on the right. As we stepped in, a whistling noise sounded from the back.

'It's the kettle, just boiled,' she said, leaving me alone.

Only the warm light of the fireplace and a reading lamp on a round table covered by a lace tablecloth allowed me to see in the small living room. Against the longest wall, opposite the fireplace, there was a high-backed pastel-coloured sofa with a floral pattern, two matching armchairs opposite, facing both ends of the settee at an angle, and a small oval coffee table in the middle of the room. A crucifix and different religious framed pictures of Jesus and the Virgin Mary hung on the wall. Near the fireplace, in the corner, there was a display unit with old antique-looking figurines and ornaments. It looked like a room from the 1930s not 2010.

I stepped closer to the fireplace to warm my hands. There were a few picture frames on the mantelpiece, and I picked up the nearest one. It was a portrait of a blond boy with greyish-blue eyes laughing at the camera. The image was grainy, as if cropped and enlarged from another smaller photo. Still, I recognised my stalker's face.

'That was taken right before the accident,' the woman said, returning from the kitchen. She placed a tray with a large teapot,

two cups and saucers, milk, and sugar on the coffee table. 'Take a seat, my dear.'

'Accident?' I asked, settling on the hard settee.

A shadow fell over her face. 'I call it an "accident". It wasn't really like that…' Her voice trembled. 'Oh, but where's my manners? I'm Helen, by the way. Helen O'Shea. Would you like some milk and sugar in your tea?' she asked, and her long lips curved into a smile again.

I studied her face, trying to memorise her features – I'd decided in the cab to try and be more observant.

She was wearing fuchsia lipstick like Jules used to. She had a long, weathered face with straight, shoulder-length grey hair and a pair of dark eyes, and her nose had a dent in it, as if it had been broken at some point. She must have been very attractive in her younger years.

'Just milk please,' I said. 'You mentioned an accident. What happened? If you don't mind me asking.'

'He got into a fight with another boy. My poor Luke, he fell and badly hit his head. It was almost three months ago; he hasn't woken up since…' she said with a sorrowful expression. 'I've prayed to the Lord every single day to give Luke back to me, but God seems to have different plans for him.'

'I thought you said your son's name was Nicholas,' I said, sipping the tea; it was rather weak.

'Forgive me – I didn't mean to confuse you. I think it would be better if he explained it all to you, but I'm afraid he's asleep. Poor boy, he hasn't rested since he arrived here yesterday.'

Yesterday? She must have been confused – the cleaner and the cab driver agreed that Nicholas had been taken home today.

'I told him it was silly of him to go searching for you straight away; he should have come here first. He's not used to resting, and he doesn't realise that a human body needs recharged from time to time.'

We were sitting with the cups in our hands, the big clock loudly ticking away on the wall. I tried to process what she'd said, but I just grew more and more confused.

'I'm sorry, you've lost me. Is your son called Nicholas or Luke? Or are they twins?'

'Oh, silly me, I knew I should have kept quiet,' she scolded herself and smiled sheepishly. 'Would you like some biscuits or sandwiches?'

'No thank you. I should be going now. It's getting late. Thank you for the tea, Mrs O'Shea.'

'You can call me Helen.'

'Thank you for the tea, *Helen*,' I said, getting up.

'What's the rush? It's only eight o'clock. He's been asleep for almost ten hours; I'm sure he'll be up soon if you want to speak to him.'

'Maybe another time,' I muttered.

I said bye and was already out the door. Something didn't seem right with either of them. They were both acting and saying strange things, and I still didn't have a clue whether my stalker was called Luke or Nicholas, or why he'd decided to seek me out and lurk outside my apartment in a hospital gown, straight after waking from a coma. None of it made any sense.

After visiting that house and seeing his mother, I was sure I'd never met either of them. And I still had no idea how the young man had known I'd come and look for him after he'd collapsed in my arms – or how he knew my name…

CHAPTER 5
STALKER

When I finished work at seven, it was already dark. Being a Sunday, apart from the pubs and eateries, most of the high street was desolate, and so were the back roads. I only noticed the footsteps behind me when I was about five minutes from home. I walked faster, but so did the person behind me. I knew there was a skip around the next corner, and when I reached it, I quickly ducked behind it before my pursuer could catch up with me.

The footsteps grew louder, and a shadow appeared in the light of the nearby lamp post. I didn't waste any time. I jumped out of my hiding place and held my weapon, a spray can, to his face.

The man screamed in agony and fell to all fours. He growled, and it was only when he pushed back his dark hoodie that I recognised my stalker from Monday.

I weighed my options – should I run or make sure he was okay? I'd read about way too many lawsuits against people who'd felt threatened one way or another then caused harm to their would-be attacker. And these intended victims ended up standing trial or paying damages… Studying legal jargon was part of my marketing training, and one of my lecturers had even mentioned a similar case when we were covering torts and trespassing.

'I can't see! It burns! What did you spray me with?' he yelled, rubbing his eyes.

'My deodorant,' I said meekly.

'Give me your water bottle.'

I quickly handed him the blue thermos I always carried. I'd refilled it at work, and it was still more than half full.

'Any better?' I asked once he'd splashed all the water into his eyes.

'No. Still burns.'

'Can you hold on to me? Just walk with me; my flat is only a hundred yards away.'

I helped him stand up, and he held on to me with one arm while constantly rubbing his eyes with the other. Apart from sucking air through gritted teeth in pain, he didn't make a sound.

He spent more than half an hour in the bathroom. When he came out, his eyes were flame red, full of burst vessels, and he was still moving unsteadily.

'Better now? Want to sit down a bit? I'll get you some ice packs.'

He took a seat on a bistro chair, still blinking hard. Having never tried the chairs myself, I wondered if they were comfy; the seat was just a round piece of hardwood.

'Mince or frozen fruit?'

He shrugged.

'I guess you can use both, one for each eye,' I said, passing him the plastic bags, and he buried his face in them.

I stayed standing.

'Why have you been following me?' I asked when the silence was starting to become awkward.

'It's part of the job description.'

Has the supermarket introduced new security measures to ensure employees who finished after dark get home okay? Perhaps they'd forgotten to put it in the latest memo…

'I'm really sorry about your eyes. Are you going to report me?'

'What?' He put down the ice packs and looked at me, opening his eyes as wide as he could, his face distorted, the sudden movement clearly causing him even more pain.

'I've intentionally caused you bodily harm. Are you going to the police about it?'

He snorted, which sounded like a 'no'.

'Thanks,' I said, relieved; it had been worth not running away. 'Wait, how did you know I carried a water bottle in my bag?'

He didn't answer.

'Who are you really?' I asked.

He was silent, so I repeated the question.

'Your guardian angel,' he muttered with a bored expression.

I thought perhaps he was a participant in a silly bet or prank and had been made to come here and say this. Maybe this whole thing was just a dangerously stupid game.

'Right, and I'm Snow White. So is your name Luke or Nicholas?' I asked – I'd need to provide the correct name when I applied for a restraining order.

'She calls me Nicholas.'

'She?'

'Luke's mother.'

'Are you guys twins or something?' I'd asked Helen the same question, but she'd behaved as if she believed the person before me was supernatural in origin. It seemed this family either had a habit of pulling pranks on complete strangers for some inconceivable reason, or they both suffered from severe mental issues.

He half opened his mouth as if to say something then changed his mind, shaking his head and looking down.

'Did someone ask you to come here?'

A single nod.

'Was it my brother? Or was it someone from work or university?'

He shook his head again, pursing his lips in frustration. He, too, looked like he was fed up with this senseless practical joke. I expected him to blurt out the names of his partners in crime any second.

'Who was it then? Who sent you?' I pressed.

He raised his head and looked deep into my eyes before he answered. I felt guiltier by the second, looking back at his swollen red eyes.

'God.'

My sympathy for him wavered, and I decided the prank had gone on long enough.

'It's best if you leave now,' I said firmly, crossing my arms.

He didn't move at first then slowly rose from the chair when I prompted him again. From the doorway, he looked back at me, and again, I had the feeling he wanted to say something, but he didn't.

I followed him into the hallway and made sure he'd left the flat before I locked the door and slid the security chain into place. This meant I'd have to stay awake until Jules returned from work so I could let her in. I didn't expect her back before well after eleven, and there were still a few hours to go.

Once I'd put the melting ice packs back in the freezer, I decided to undo the chain on the front door – if I left it on, I'd have to tell Jules what had prompted me to make use of it in the first place, and that would include *everything* that had happened, including me inviting a stranger into the flat (the same stranger who'd been stalking me). Then she'd go on for hours about how stupid I'd been to put myself in harm's way and potentially her too, if she'd arrived home while they were still in the flat. I wouldn't just have to listen to it once either – she'd likely bring it up every now and then for the rest of my life.

After a quick dinner and shower, I studied for an hour then went to bed. I couldn't help noticing a shadow standing outside as I went to draw the curtains in my bedroom. It looked like the silhouette of the man calling himself Nicholas. An uncanny sensation started to engulf me, but it wasn't fear. I felt inexplicably safe and calm, despite the deranged stranger lurking around the block. I drew my blackout curtains tight and fell asleep as soon as my head hit the pillow.

*

My eyes were burning from reading my global marketing book for the past few hours. I'd been highlighting the parts I thought were most important, and the neon lines had started to merge into one big yellow patch similar to a giant cat eye. I put down the book and decided to make a strong tea.

Standing by the kettle, I pulled aside the net curtain at the kitchen window. Outside, chunky snowflakes were falling softly, brightening up the dark street. Opposite, in front of the metal fence of the communal gardens, under the streetlight, stood the young blond man, rubbing his hands together, his breath visible in the cold. Again it felt like he was staring right back at me. I sighed, grabbed my coat and keys, and slipped into my shoes.

'What are you doing here? Do you want to freeze to death?' I asked him once I was outside, but he didn't answer. 'Why don't you just go home?'

'I can't.'

Perhaps Mrs O'Shea had had enough of the prank too and told him to stay away. But then again, he could have just gone to a train station to warm up or to a friend who'd let him stay over. But no, instead of *my* preferred options, he'd once again chosen to stand outside my flat, risking another ride in an ambulance.

'I'm sure I'll regret this but come in then, before you become an ice sculpture.'

He followed me back to the flat in silence.

'How are your eyes doing? Still seem a bit red.'

'Fine,' he said.

'Do you want some tea? Kettle's just boiled – it will warm you up.'

I poured both of us a mug and stirred in a bit of milk.

'You like it strong? Sugar? No?' He was looking at me impassively. 'Fine – strong no sugar then.' I passed him a mug with the teabag left in. 'Have you eaten dinner yet?'

He was still staring at me, then he shook his head ever so slightly.

'Me neither. Let's see what we have,' I said as I examined the contents of the fridge. 'I can make an omelette and some chips.'

He didn't say a word, so I turned on the oven and started mixing the eggs in a bowl.

'Sit down, and you can watch the TV. The remote is just on the coffee table – under the pile of paper somewhere – if you want to change channels.'

But instead of the remote, he picked up my book and started turning the pages slowly.

'Listen, I need to study, but you can stay for a while to warm up. You'll have to go before my flatmate comes home though,' I called out from the kitchen.

When everything was ready, I sliced a tomato to share between the two portions.

'Careful, the plate might be hot,' I said as I served dinner to him. 'Eat up.' I sat on the other end of the sofa with my plate.

He looked at the food on his lap as if he hadn't seen an omelette before, then slowly cut it up and took a bite. I'd expected him to clear his plate within minutes, given how deprived of food his body looked, but I was long finished before he even started on the chips and the tomato. He was also sipping the tea between bites, which must have been cold. I'd never seen anyone eat so slowly.

I took my plate back to the kitchen and opened my book again.

'Don't watch me; watch the TV,' I told him. It seemed the prank was still ongoing.

When the letters started to become blurry again, I decided to close my eyes to rest them for a second.

It was daylight when I opened them again. I was covered with a blanket, my head resting on a pillow at one end of the sofa, my legs stretched towards the other. The papers and books that had been scattered around the place were neatly arranged into two piles on the coffee table, and the dirty dishes had been washed and left to dry beside the sink. I checked my phone: it was almost half seven.

There was no sign of the young man who'd been in the flat.

'Hey, Sleeping Beauty, who's Henry?' Jules asked as she appeared from the bathroom.

'Huh?'

'You kept saying that name, Henry, in your dream.'

'Haven't the foggiest,' I said. 'By the way, thanks for tidying up.'

'What are you talking about?'

For a second, I thought I'd only dreamed inviting my stalker in, but that wouldn't have explained the tidy flat.

'Never mind, I'm still half asleep,' I said, going to the bathroom to get ready for the day ahead.

*

Fortunately, I remembered which street I'd taken the bus from when I'd come back from my first visit to Morden: it was a road parallel to where the O'Sheas lived. But I didn't remember the house number the peculiar family lived at. I hadn't imagined I'd ever go there again, but I'd been wrong. The houses on the road all looked much the same, however I recalled a red door and a tree outside, which limited the options to three. I tried looking through the windows to see if I could recognise the living-room furniture and got lucky first time around.

I knocked on the door, and the woman answered it again.

'Hi, Elizabeth. What a nice surprise!'

'Hi, Mrs O'Shea.'

'Did I not ask you last time to call me Helen? So, what brings you back here? You left rather abruptly the other day.' She pulled her eyebrows together.

'Yes, sorry about that. I forgot I had to do something at home and had to rush off,' I said.

She played along with my lie, nodding sympathetically.

'If you have a minute, do you mind if I come in?' I didn't want the neighbours to overhear what I wanted to discuss; I was afraid they might call an asylum to send someone to collect both of us.

She opened the door wider to let me in and offered me tea. I took a seat on the hard settee again, and she sat opposite me in the same winged armchair as last time, clasping her hands together. The furniture may have been old, but the place seemed spotless, though the room felt even smaller than it had a week ago.

'I take it you're here to talk about Nicholas.'

I nodded, squirming in my seat, the teacup in my hand. 'Is he here?'

'Well, you're here, so I'm sure he can't be very far…'

'This is exactly it. He says he's a… that he's my…' I couldn't even bring myself to say it out loud, but she finished the sentence for me without hesitation.

'Guardian angel.'

'Is your son alright? Has he got a split personality or something since the accident?'

'But, dear, I think I told you the other day that *he* isn't my son,' she said. 'He's in Luke's body, but that spirit isn't Luke.'

'How can you be so sure he's not your son?'

'I just know. A mother knows these things. Once you have a child, you'll understand. Besides, there are obvious differences.'

'Like what?'

'You probably look around this room and, like everyone else, just assume a very religious family lives here. It's true for me; I'm a believer, or have been for the past fifteen years or so. But my son never believed in God or the existence of any higher powers. Then Nicholas appears, and he's the opposite of my son in every aspect. They say the eyes are the mirror of the soul. And I'm telling you that the soul or spirit in Luke's body isn't Luke.'

'I see…'

'Do you? Or do you just think you're talking to a delirious middle-aged woman?' she asked calmly.

'I'm sorry, I didn't mean to suggest you were—'

The cup slipped from my fingers and hit the edge of the coffee table, shattering into pieces so the dark liquid seeped

into the cream carpet. My mind turned blank, and instead of offering her help, I just watched her clean up the mess. Strangely, her greying hair looked jet black, her nails bright red as she brushed the bits into a dustpan.

'I'm so sorry,' I said when she sat back in her chair.

'Don't worry, dear.' She smiled. 'You know you're exactly what he said you would be.'

'You mean he talks about me?'

'Oh yeah, he said you were a nice girl but a bit lost.'

'He said that? What else did he say?'

'That you were his mission.'

That was kind of obvious if he was claiming to be my guardian angel.

'Hmm, let me think… he didn't say "you"; he said it was "your soul",' she said then looked up to one side, thinking, patting an index finger on her lower lip. 'No, the word he used was "redemption" – that's it. I remember now; he said your redemption was at stake.'

'Did he say any more? Did he say why?'

She shrugged and smiled. 'He's a man, or rather an angel of few words…'

'I see,' I said again, and not knowing what further to ask from her, I got up, thanked her for her time, and left for work.

Helen had been right. Nicholas wasn't far; he was standing on the other side of the road watching me come out of the house. Our eyes met as I left, but I hurried on to the nearest bus stop.

*

It was Thursday, when Jules and I'd typically separate in the middle of the day after the first lecture. She'd head to yoga, her latest obsession, then to work, while I'd base myself in the cafeteria and/or hide in the university library before attending more seminars. On a whim, I asked her if she could get me signed up for today's yoga class. I felt like I needed an activity

that could clear my mind after all the nonsense I'd listened to at Helen's on Tuesday (and after the long day at work I'd spent with Ian Adkins on Wednesday). I'd heard yoga was good for spiritual uplifting and clearing one's thoughts.

When we arrived at the fitness studio, there were already a few women and men sitting on mats and chatting. The men were quite good-looking, but Jules skipped the introductions – she seemed to have taken on board the request to stay out of my love life.

I'd thought yoga was about stretching and breathing; little had I known it would be one of the most strenuous workouts I'd ever endured. When the session finished, I was starving and could barely pull myself up from the floor. Now I knew the real reason Jules never put on any weight wasn't because she only ate rabbit food and small plates of what I cooked. I suspected she was fed large portions of real food at her mother's restaurant, and after participating in today's session, I was convinced no one could survive yoga on vegetables, raw fish, and minute portions.

Following the class, Jules eagerly headed to work, and with similar enthusiasm, I rushed towards the canteen; I still had about forty minutes before my next seminar. I had to pass through a courtyard connecting most of the academic buildings to get to the cafe. And there was my blond stalker, sitting on one of the benches. When he saw me, he stood up, ready to follow me, but I stopped and turned to face him.

'Ah, it's *you* again! I saw you at the studio earlier,' I said. The instructor had sent him away because he hadn't signed up; Jules missed the exchange as she'd been too preoccupied discussing yoga positions with the others. 'And was it you who sneaked into the human resource management class too?' I'd seen a shadow climb up the steps to the back of the auditorium just as the lecture had been about to start.

His silence said it all.

'Please stop stalking me,' I begged quietly. I didn't want to create a scene in front of the other students.

'You know I can't.'

'No, I don't know – for all I know, you could be a serial killer.'

'Do you not think I've had plenty of chances if I wanted to kill you?'

He had a point, but I wasn't going to admit defeat.

'You're still a stalker,' I said then took a couple of steps towards the entrance of the building opposite the sports facility. I heard him take a step too.

I turned back again. 'You're not going to leave me alone, are you?'

I took his silence as a 'no'.

'I should be reporting you to the police and getting a restraining order.'

He didn't comment.

'The only reason I'm not going to is… is because I feel sorry for you. You're so delirious it's just pathetic. And because Helen seems like a good mother.' Though again, her sanity was questionable.

To be honest, I wasn't sure why I hadn't already gone to the police about him. At first, I'd been worried about the deodorant incident and that it would backfire on me. Though later I realised Jules would have likely testified that he'd been stalking me, and I'd done it in self-defence. But what would I say to the police now anyway? '*Yes, this guy's been stalking me, but only because he's got mental-health issues. In his imaginary world, he's my guardian angel.*'

Who would say no to a free personal bodyguard? Or should I tell them, '*Yes, Nicholas is a stalker, but actually, I've invited him to my home twice now, even made him dinner and watched a film with him, but I clearly oppose his company? Please, dear police, get rid of him for me. Please*'?

It was just too late to do anything about him now. It seemed I was stuck with him for God only knew how much longer… And I was still starving, so I wanted to get things sorted quickly.

'Okay,' I sighed, 'but we need to set some rules.'

His eyes lit up – finally, he was showing some interest in what I was saying.

'Rule number one: you can't come to classes with me. Don't look at me like that; it's not like I'm going to get kidnapped in front of all those other students. While I'm at lectures, you can stay at the library, gym, cafeteria, computer room, or courtyard. Deal? I'll call you once I'm finished, and you can walk me home.'

'I don't have a phone.'

'Then get yourself one!' I snapped. My stomach was now making loud noises. 'Rule number two: you can't come inside my workplace. That's a firm *no*! You'll get me fired. And if you've been lurking around there for a week, as I suspect you have, I'm sure you're already on the security staff's radar too.'

He didn't comment this time, only pursed his lips. Which to me translated as 'whatever, go on'. So I did.

'Rule number three: you can't follow me on dates, or when I'm out with Jules… Not that there's likely to happen often anyway. Don't even think about it, or I'll go ahead with the restraining order.'

His face hardened at this, but he still didn't say a word.

'Rule number four: you need to start eating properly. You're like a walking skeleton. I mean, come on – you claim to be my protector, but even the wind could break you in half. Actually, best if you familiarise yourself with the cafeteria right now. Come on – I'm hungry too.'

'I'm not hungry.'

'Shh… No argument or I'll start screaming that you're a madman harassing me; I'm sure those big guys over there will take care of you for me.'

He looked over his left shoulder, but I wasn't bluffing. A group of tall, muscly boys were eyeing him from the far corner of the courtyard.

'Fine,' he said, clearly appalled by my list of demands.

'Alright then, let's call it a deal.' I offered my right hand, and he hesitantly took it and shook it while murmuring something inaudible.

'Let's go then,' I said. 'Cafeteria's this way.'

I got both of us large portions of fish and chips with garden peas and some orange juice for him; I had my water bottle to drink from. We settled down at an empty table with our trays. It was nearly two o'clock, and I hadn't eaten since breakfast. I was halfway through my meal when I realised he hadn't even picked up his fork.

'Did Christ not feed fish to the people?' I asked.

'Says who?'

'The Bible?'

He snorted.

'We just made a deal – start eating, or I'm going to get those boys in here. I'm not kidding.'

He picked up his fork and, at first, just started to play with his food, pushing the peas from one side of the plate to the other. Then, finally, he took a bite of the fish and began to chew. My plate had been spotless for about ten minutes when his was still half full.

'I've got to go to class,' I said, wiping my mouth with a napkin. 'Finish your food, and I'll guess I'll see you later.'

After the marketing research lecture, I came across him again in the courtyard. As I waved to him, the strap of my shoulder bag broke, and the contents fell to the ground. He jumped up and rushed over to help me pick everything up. As he bent down, he murmured something under his breath.

'What?' I asked, straightening up. 'Did you say that humans are terrible?'

He shrugged.

'You're not very sociable, are you? But what made you say that?'

'There are twenty students in this small courtyard, and none of them came to help you.'

'You did.'

'I'm not human.'

'Can you please keep it down?' I said, looking sideways to see if anyone had heard him. 'I'll make this rule number five,' I

whispered. 'No fantastic references in public please – "humans", "angels", and the like.'

I tucked my bag under my arm as we started walking. What I found odd wasn't the silence between us, but that the silence didn't actually feel odd. Though something was on my mind, and I thought I'd raise it before we reached the flat, just to humour him.

'Can you speak Mongolian?' I asked.

'I can speak any language.'

'Prove it then. Say something in Mongolian.'

'Can you speak Mongolian?'

I shook my head.

'So how would you be able to tell that what I'm saying is in Mongolian?'

'Fair enough,' I said – he did have a point. Again. 'What about special powers like super strength or laser vision?'

'I think you're confusing me with a cartoon character. And right now, I'm limited to the physical abilities of the host body.'

'I guess that's a "no" then. How convenient! So why should I believe what you're saying is true?'

'Then don't. As long as you believe in God, you believe in me.'

'What if I don't believe in God? I mean, I used to… Now I'm not sure. I haven't been praying or going to church for a long time now.'

'God is everywhere. One doesn't need four walls and a roof to be with Him.'

'I do believe that some energy or power exists,' I said, thinking. 'I mean, there must be something out there – the world didn't just come from nothing, but every time I think about it, my head starts to hurt because then I start thinking about where God then comes from…'

'It doesn't matter whether you call Him God, Allah, or some "power"; He has always been and always will be. He is infinite, and so is His love.'

'If God loves us so much, why are there so many terrible things on Earth? Why do so many children starve, suffer, and

die? Why do bad things keep happening to good people?

'You think you know what love means. The meaning of love has been corrupted over time.'

'Tell me then, what is love?'

'I know what's bothering you,' he said and stopped.

I stopped too and looked at him questioningly.

'You think God is to blame for your mother's death.'

'I don't know who's to blame,' I lied, turning away from him. Above all, I blamed my father – God was only second in line. 'But I know that young children shouldn't have to grow up without a mother,' I added, and we started walking again.

'God's love allows you to make decisions for yourself; hence you have free will. You may not choose when that ending comes, but you choose the path that leads you to it.'

'You can't say we have free will when our destiny is already written. And how do you know about my mother?'

He didn't respond.

'I don't have time for this,' I said. 'I've got to study. I take it if I don't invite you in, you'll try to freeze to death again. So come in before I change my mind.'

And, of course, he followed me in.

*

Nicholas was still following me on Friday morning, from the flat to work. Though technically he wasn't following me as we were walking together.

'There you go,' I said as I was about to enter the supermarket.

'What's this?'

'One of my favourites. I thought you'd probably make pass on *Anne of Green Gables* and *Jane Eyre*. But boys tend to like *Treasure Island*. What? You haven't seen a book before?'

He gave me a hard stare. 'What do you want me to do with this?'

'Read it of course – what else? But I'll want it back. And here's a fiver – there's a Costa across the road; you might as well

wait for me there instead of out here in the rain. Get yourself a coffee and a cake or something,' I said, waving him away.

'Don't look at me like that. It's not like I'm gonna disappear. I'll come and get you when I finish. It's annoying to have you staring in at me while I'm trying to work. Go before you get soaked. You probably haven't heard of colds or pneumonia.'

'Rain doesn't cause colds – or pneumonia.'

'Whatever, just go!'

He still hadn't moved when I entered the store.

'Is that your boyfriend? Bit rough looking but cute,' said Matty, one of my youngest colleagues, as a way of greeting me. His real name was Maati, but everyone called him Matty, and he didn't mind. He was only seventeen, tall and skinny with dark eyes, his styled black hair parted sideways, and he could wear his work uniform as if it was Chanel.

'No, he isn't.'

'Is there a chance you could introduce me? Or is he…?'

'I'm sorry, Matty, he's a hopeless case, really out of this world.'

CHAPTER 6
A TEMPTING OFFER

It was a Monday, yet I was lying in bed at half eight, still yawning and stretching, not even attempting to get up. Tiredness had finally caught up with me, and it wasn't like I had anywhere to be – it was the first day of winter half term.

Jules had left for Cyprus for a few days to visit her brothers, without Steve. They'd paid for her flight. She'd tried to convince me to go with her, but it had been too late to request holidays from my boss, and the period leading up to Christmas was always the busiest. Also, I couldn't bring myself to turn my savings into an expensive air ticket – her brothers' generosity didn't extend to me.

Last summer, my brother and his wife (then fiancée) had been invited to Australia to visit her rich auntie, who lived just outside Sydney. Sarah's auntie had paid for their flights and put them up on her farm. She took them to other large cities like Brisbane, Canberra, and Melbourne, and they even had a chance to go on a trip in the Outback and watch the mysterious Uluru at sunset. I thought the backdrop of the colour-changing rock in the middle of the desert would have provided a more romantic setting for a marriage proposal than a three-star hotel room in Italy, had Will waited a bit longer to ask the question. But everyone around me seemed to be in such a rush to get a ring on their fingers. *But what do I know about romance and relationships?*

Anyway, I didn't have a rich auntie or uncle hiding in Australia, America, or even Cyprus, so half-term travel didn't

seem like something I could ever afford. After finishing my studies, I'd just have to be competent and convincing enough to sell the idea of expensive holidays to others. Because as I figured out early on in my undergraduate studies, that's what marketing was all about: convincing people they needed something even if they couldn't afford it. I tried to avoid telling lies, but I could stretch my moral principles enough to bend the truth.

I often wondered whether I should have studied journalism like my brother, or law, or gone back to my artistic aspirations. But writing had never interested me, and even after three or four years of working at a newspaper, my brother still couldn't afford to put down a deposit on a house. And the law, although it would have meant a better salary in the long term, would have likely required me to bend the truth to such an angle I'd never have been able to do it with a straight face. And though my heart had ached to give up my childhood dream, pursuing art was unlikely to result in me being acknowledged in my own lifetime. The rule of thumb was that the value of paintings exponentially increased after an artist's death – not before. And money couldn't really help me in the afterlife.

My phone started to vibrate, and all the sleepiness disappeared from my eyes as I read the message on the screen. It was from Sarah, asking me to call her ASAP. My heart skipped a beat. *Has something happened to Will?*

I immediately dialled her number, and she picked up on the first ring.

'Hi, Sarah. Is everything okay?' I asked cautiously.

'All good, Liz,' she said, and I felt light again.

There was a short pause before she continued, 'Actually, Cora is in town again on a photoshoot. They need a stand-in for a set assistant, and I thought I'd check how your week is looking.' She, too, had been a university student, and I figured the idea of 'half term' was still vivid in her memory. 'If you're interested of course. I hear the money's not too bad.'

'This week, I'm free today, tomorrow, and Thursday.'

'What a coincidence! As I recall, those are the exact days they need help.'

'That's lucky indeed.'

'Listen, Cora gave me the address; it's in Central London. I'll text it to you and her number,' she said. She must have expected me to say yes. 'Can you be there at 11 a.m.?'

'Sure, thanks.'

'Speak later. Bye, Liz.'

Seconds after we'd hung up, the phone buzzed again. The address was indeed in Central London, bang on in fact, as it was near Bond Street. I decided I still had enough time for a quick run before I had to leave.

I quickly pulled on my sports gear and followed the route I'd picked out in October on my first run, though I'd since extended it a mile, to Wandsworth Common.

As I arrived at the park, it started drizzling. I should have paid more attention to the grey clouds when I'd left the flat. Then the rain began to pour down, and I quickly headed for cover at a bus shelter nearby.

I leaned against the red plastic bench and hoped the storm would pass as fast as it had arrived. The rain was lashing sideways, whipping my bare legs. Suddenly a strange sensation started to spread all over me. I had butterflies in my stomach, as if I'd just been kissed…

*

'Cornelia darling, you're done for today. You've been *magnifico* as always,' said the photographer, flicking his left index finger and thumb together close to his mouth, pursing his lips, and sending a kiss into the air. 'The only *minuscula observación*, if I may, is that next time try not to cover your belly button so much; then perhaps we can achieve *perfección* a teeny-weeny bit sooner.'

He was short and bald with thick-framed square glasses and sported a long black-grey-purple braided beard. His immaculate

moustache was extremely thin and long, curling up on both sides. No one seemed to bat an eyelid at his unique appearance, and I guessed he was considered trendy in the fashion world.

'Cornelia?' I asked Cora, raising an eyebrow as she walked off the set, pulling a white gown around her to cover the bikini she was wearing and smoothing it down over her stomach. I had to ask twice before she noticed me.

'Shh,' she said, covering her lips with her index finger. 'Diego is such a dear – I've never had the heart to correct him. He thinks Cora is a shortened name…'

As she said the last two words, the names *Christopher* and *Annabella* popped into my head. Not that I knew anyone with those names.

Diego looked at his note again. 'Next, we have Louise. No, pardon, Louise is crossed out. It says "Christine". *Dónde está ella*? Where is that drama queen?'

'Christine.' I tasted the word, and red-and-orange flame-like forms flashed before my eyes, and I rubbed them. I must have still been exhausted from work and studying. Why did the name sound familiar? I was convinced I hadn't met anyone called Christine.

The photographer was gesturing angrily in my direction. I stepped closer to him.

'You, *sí*, you! Can you go and find Christine, *por favor*? The sun is about to set, so we have about twenty minutes before the natural light becomes unusable. Come on – wakey-wakey. It's gonna be *mañana* at the speed you move.'

He may have been a dear to the famous Cora Clarke, but clearly, I wasn't as important as her.

I nodded and pressed my lips together tight before I said something that would cost me the job. It wasn't particularly hard work: making teas and coffees, photocopying and handing out schedules, running some errands to nearby boutiques, and handing out accessories – fancy hats, scarves, and belts – from an already prepared stand. If something wasn't already at hand, I was sent to fetch it, and so on. It was good money though, and I only had to survive three days…

I found Christine sitting in a swivel chair in front of a large mirror in the basement. I couldn't recall seeing her before, but as the other models scheduled for the day had finished, I was positive that this young woman – with her long, curly dark hair streaked with caramel highlights, ebony skin, and bright make-up – was the person I'd been sent for.

Typing away on her phone, she was alone in the windowless room, illuminated only by some mirror lights. She must have heard my steps on the metal spiral staircase, but she didn't look up.

I cleared my throat, but she still didn't acknowledge my presence, so I took a deep breath and knocked on the door-frame of the open door. Looking annoyed, she finally lifted her head for a second, then carried on typing.

'Who are you, and what do you want?' she asked in a less-than-friendly tone.

'I'm covering Carla and was sent to tell you that the photographer is ready for you, so if you could come with me now please.'

'Who the hell is Carla? I'll go when I'm ready.' She raised her head again, and if looks could kill, I'd have been long buried.

'What are you still doing here?' she hissed a minute later.

'I'm really sorry, but Diego said the light will change soon, and—'

'Seriously, who the hell do you think you are, fatty, to hurry me like that? You clearly have no idea who you're talking to,' she snarled but slammed the phone down in front of the mirror and slowly started to rise.

I didn't wait for her to follow me. Usually, I'd have argued back, but I bit my tongue again before I lost my temper – and the job.

'*Dónde está* Christine?' The photographer looked at me, stomping his feet impatiently. 'Where is she?'

'She'll be here in a minute,' I said, hoping my prediction would be correct. Then I went to get a drink from the water cooler.

'You alright, Lizzie?' asked Cora, putting her hand on my shoulder.

My body was shaking with anger.

'Sure,' I said, gulping the water. 'Are all the other models like that?'

'Like what?' she asked. 'Oh, you mean Christine? Not all, but quite a few of them have been modelling since they were babies. They're just used to being treated… *differently*. Christine can be a bit… *challenging*, but she's one of the most versatile models I've ever worked with.'

It was typical of Cora not to badmouth anyone and attempt to see the good in everyone. She'd been discovered in a McDonald's at the age of sixteen and fame hadn't changed her.

I looked up into her almond-shaped eyes. At the start of the day, they'd been bright and lively, but there was barely any light left in them now, and her lips were half open as if exhaling all the spirit left in her. She'd been holding the same awkward positions and forcing smiles for most of the day, while I'd been cruising freely.

I wasn't sure why, but whenever I'd watched Cora posing for the camera, my brother's wedding had come to mind. We were both supposed to be bridesmaids, but due to a mix-up, I'd been sent the wrong colour dress and had no time left to sort out the issue. Sarah was very understanding though – my brother less so.

'How do you manage to put up with them? It must be hell working with such an egotistical bunch of women. You're a good person, down to earth, not a stuck-up bitch like Christine.'

'As I said, not all of the models are like that. And I just focus on my job.'

'Well, I don't envy you. I couldn't do what you do all day.'

'It was my choice, wasn't it?' she said with a weak smile. 'And it's really not that bad. The money is good obviously.' She shrugged, then she added, 'And don't worry about Christine; she won't remember you by tomorrow.'

I wasn't sure whether that was a good thing.

'I'm going back to the hotel now. You gonna be alright?'

'Sure.' I nodded and hoped the shoot wouldn't last much longer than a couple of hours.

'I didn't know we had another girl to shoot today,' said a strong voice behind Cora, and a second later, a young man with dark olive skin appeared next to her.

'Oh, I'm… I'm not a model. I'm with Caro— I mean Cora. I'm covering Carla, the set assistant,' I said, blushing.

'Well, Cora darling, why don't you introduce us?' he asked, his gaze fixed on me. I noticed everyone had gone quiet in the room.

'Lizzie, this is Victor, the manager of the agency; and, Victor, this is Lizzie, my sister-in-law,' she said.

Technically I was her stepsister's sister-in-law, but I decided against correcting her. She sounded exhausted, and I could sense she'd rather have been soaking in a hot bath than wasting her time with introductions.

'It's a pleasure meeting you, Lizzie.' He slowly took my hand and pressed a delicate kiss to it, not breaking eye contact for a second. His touch sent a hot wave through my body, and I blushed again.

Then he raised his head, and his expression hardened. 'What's she doing here?' he exclaimed angrily, looking in Christine's direction as she emerged from the basement. 'Anita, Diego, where is Louise?' he shouted and went to speak to the stylist and the photographer who looked surprised to see him.

'I hope I didn't get you into trouble,' I said when he was out of earshot.

'What makes you say that?' asked Cora.

'It doesn't seem like he was expected to turn up. Does he know I've taken Carla's place?'

'The truth is it was his idea, sort of. He asked me if I knew anyone who might be available. Most of the crew is from Spain. Getting a local in with short notice is easier than flying someone in—'

I sensed she was about to say a lot cheaper too, but she stopped.

'He looks like he could be a model himself.'

'He was, for a couple of years, but his dad has bigger plans for him. His father is Ignacio, the head of the modelling agency – they have some other ventures too. And Victor, as his only son, stands to take over the business – very soon I hear.'

'Isn't he too young to run a company? I mean, he can't be older than what, twenty-seven.'

'Close – twenty-eight I think. He travels a lot, always on the hunt for new models and business partners.'

'The business can't be doing that great if they're in need of fresh faces and now apparently a fresh pair of eyes too,' I said with a frown. 'Have you thought about signing up with another agency?'

She shrugged. 'They keep me busy enough, and I owe a lot to them. I can't leave now. There's not much time left on my contract anyway,' she added, sounding rather displeased about it.

'Sorry about that, ladies,' said Victor with a charming smile as he returned. 'Unfortunately, business always comes first. But where were we? Cora darling, you look shattered. Why don't you get yourself home?'

Cora glanced at me hesitantly.

'Victor's right. You should get some rest – you deserve it,' I said to Cora, and she nodded.

'I'll see you tomorrow, Liz. Goodbye, Victor.'

'Can I get you something?' I asked Victor as Cora left for the changing rooms. 'A tea or coffee? Anything you want. That's what I'm here for.'

He smiled. 'That's a very tempting offer, but I think, for now, dinner will do.'

'I can run out and get you something if you tell me what you want.'

He laughed, his dark eyes glowing. 'That's not what I meant. Your naivety is so refreshing. I'm making the offer, and you just have to accept it. So will you have dinner with me?'

'I'm sorry?'

'Not now of course, and I have to leave London for a few days; I have some business to attend to on the continent. But I'll be back on Friday, so we could get together then?'

His gaze hypnotised me; I'd never seen such big, dark eyes, yet they seemed oddly familiar.

'Sure,' I said.

'It's settled then. Here's my card.'

I took the card; it was black with red shining, curling letters. 'Victor De Cabra – Tierra Negra Industries,' it read, with his number underneath – no title, no further information.

By the time I looked up, he was gone.

CHAPTER 7
DANTE'S

It was Friday and my short-lived work experience as a set assistant had finished the day before. I hadn't seen Victor since Monday and was convinced I'd never hear from him again – though I'd texted him to say I was looking forward to seeing him when he was back from his business trip, just so he'd have my number. Of course, he must have been exercising his male power and enjoying his effect on women when trying to flirt with me – if the brief exchange between us could be considered flirting.

I couldn't believe my eyes when a message from him appeared on my phone, just as I was about to leave for work in the morning. It said, '*I'll pick you up at 6*.' Although it didn't ask for acknowledgement, I replied with an '*Okay*'. I still couldn't believe a millionaire like him would be interested in a girl like me. After all, I wasn't an orphaned cartoon princess or a good-hearted prostitute from a Hollywood tale.

Leaving work at three, I had two and a half hours to get ready once I got home. Of course, Nicholas had walked me home, but I didn't invite him in. As per rule number three, he was to make himself scarce.

After a longer-than-usual shower, it took me over an hour to decide what to wear. It was pretty cold outside, and the idea of putting on a pair of dark jeans with a nice top and a cardigan was tempting, but Jules would have killed me for wearing a 'spinster' outfit for a date. So I put on a navy-and-white polka-dot dress that had three-quarter-length sleeves and ended just above my

knee. To look more fashionable, I used a trick I'd learned at the photoshoots, tying a thick red belt borrowed from Jules around my waist instead of the navy one that had come with the dress.

The dress was a light material, which I'd typically wear only in summer, but I had no other option if I wanted to look feminine. At least I had a warm grey duffle coat to put over it. I hoped it would be warm wherever he took me.

When Victor didn't show up at six; again, I thought he'd just been playing with me. But ten minutes later, there was a knock on the door. I quickly grabbed my bag, ready to flee the flat.

But it wasn't him. It was the pair of Jehovah's Witnesses who, sixteen months after we'd moved in, still hadn't given up trying to convert Jules and me. It took me a good five minutes to get rid of them.

When I returned to the living room, another text message awaited me: '*Got held up at work. Can you meet me at the offices on New Bond Street*.'

I felt relieved and annoyed at the same time. Although there was no question mark at the end of the message, I quickly typed back: '*Okay*.'

I got to Tierra Negra London headquarters at five past seven and asked the receptionist to let Victor know I'd arrived. I kept my coat on but opened it when he still hadn't come down after five minutes.

'Lizzie, you look gorgeous,' he said with a charming smile when he finally came downstairs and kissed my hand.

'Thank you.' His presence made me so nervous my stomach twisted.

'Where are we going?' I asked as we stepped outside. He'd held the door for me.

He said we had a table booked for half seven around Piccadilly Circus. But before we could take a step, his phone buzzed.

'Would you excuse me for one more minute? Business is calling again. I'll be quick.'

'Sure – you do what you need to do,' I said, forcing a smile, and he returned to the lobby of the tall, Georgian-style building. I was impatient and didn't fancy following him back there like a dog on a leash.

While I waited, I started pacing in front of the offices, then crossed the road and paused in front of a boutique to admire a silvery-blue V-neck floor-length dress. It had spaghetti straps, a cut-out front, and floral details with shiny stones all over. I wished I'd worn that for my prom and not the second-hand short yellow dress I'd picked with Jules in the Cancer Research shop.

'Sorry about that, but I'm all yours now,' said Victor, joining me on the pavement.

'That was quick.'

'I said it would be.' He looked in the shop window. 'Why don't we go in here?'

'Because I probably can't afford anything in there.'

'We'll just have a look,' he said and shepherded me through the entrance.

'We're going to be late for the restaurant,' I protested, but my words of warning were wasted on him.

The two sales assistants, who looked to be in their mid to late thirties – one with raven-black hair; the other with a darker shade of red than mine – jumped up from the seats behind the desk as the door closed behind us with a ring. They were both dressed in simple yet elegant long-sleeved white blouses and black mid-length skirts and heels. They had thick golden jewellery on as if to emphasise that this shop was open only for a select few. They cast me looks of disapproval, and I immediately knew how Julia Roberts's character in *Pretty Woman* must have felt the first time she'd tried to go shopping on Rodeo Drive.

'Let's just go,' I said, trying to grab Victor's hand, but he gently pushed me forward and put on his most charming smile.

'Good evening, ladies. This lovely young enchantress has been completely taken by that blue dress from the shop window. Would you be so kind as to fetch that in her size please?'

'Of course, sir. Just a moment please,' said the dark-haired one with a big smile.

I suspected her beaming was due to the fact that Victor hadn't referred to me as his girlfriend.

'But just to warn you, we don't have anything bigger than size ten,' she added, measuring me up with a sour face.

'Size eight should be fine,' I said, and the sales assistant forced a smile at me too. On some days I could even get away with a size six, but I didn't want to push my luck and give the women any more reason to feel superior in case I had to ask for the next size up.

I'd never seen so much eyelash flapping in a man's direction than while I was waiting for them to find my size and a pair of shoes to try on with the dress. Victor seemed utterly oblivious to how much my presence wasn't wanted in that shop and how much his was.

The blue dress did look like a dream when I tried it on, but the material was so light it made me feel like I was wearing almost nothing, especially since the back was fully cut out, only held together by some cleverly crossed strings.

'It's gorgeous…' I said.

Victor smiled. 'Not as gorgeous as you are.'

'But where would I wear something like this?' I checked the price tag; it cost twice as much as I earned in a month. 'And I definitely can't afford this.'

A low cough sounded, and the dark-haired assistant appeared, holding three more dresses.

'Sir, I hope you don't mind, but I took the liberty of bringing you a few more of our latest arrivals that would likely match your partner's skin tone better.'

'Lizzie, darling, why don't you try these on too?' He nodded to the woman, and she passed me the dresses rather forcefully.

'Shouldn't we go? The restaurant is booked for seven-thirty, isn't it?' I whispered.

'Why spoil the fun?' he asked, winking at me. 'The restaurant can wait.'

The quick movement of his eyelid made me feel like standing on a dance floor instead of a shop floor.

Unfortunately, my heart was breaking, as all three dresses looked stunning. One was a black knee-length tea dress with lace sleeves and lace inserts on the front above the chest. The second one was a lime-green evening dress, in some sort of silk or satin material, and the last one was a deep-purple cocktail dress, with a shiny puffed-up skirt and a halter neck that created a daring cleavage – I did try that in a size six as well, but it was too small. Their cost combined was at least half of my yearly wages. Although I knew these dresses wouldn't leave the shop with me, I felt like a thief trying them on. I'd also managed to break the zip on the green one when trying to get it off. I put them back on their hangers, nervously trying to figure out how I'd pay for the damage I'd caused.

'So?' he asked.

'They're all beautiful,' I said. 'But…'

'I understand,' he said with a sad-puppy expression. 'Let me take them back for you.'

'Thanks.'

I stayed behind to put my coat on, grabbed my bag, and fixed my hair and make-up quickly. I only hoped I hadn't left any mascara or eyeshadow on them. At least I wasn't wearing lipstick.

Victor was still at the till chatting up the ladies when I emerged from the changing rooms.

'Ready, darling?'

I nodded, and the ladies gave us their best smiles as we left.

'They seemed to take it quite well that we didn't buy anything,' I said once we were well past the shop.

'Why are you running?' he asked, grabbing my elbow to slow me down.

'Because we're already late – our reservation was for seven-thirty, and it's already a quarter to eight.'

'Darling, you need to chill. It's not the sort of restaurant where one arrives out of breath and covered in sweat.'

'Shall we take the Tube then? The restaurant is only like two stops from here.'

He looked almost disgusted at the word 'Tube', and I realised it had been a bad call – Victor had probably never taken the underground once in his life.

He hailed a taxi that seemed to have appeared out of nowhere, and after opening the door for me, he gave the address to the driver, whose expression turned bitter when he heard how close our destination was. I waited for the cab driver to tell us to get out, but he thought better of it, and Victor must have tipped him handsomely, as he drove away with a smile after dropping us off.

We got to the restaurant half an hour late, and I could barely refrain from running up to the entrance and barging in. But I now understood this wasn't the sort of behaviour Victor would approve of, so instead, I fell into step beside him.

Upon entering, Victor gave his name to the tall, middle-aged man who had a big book on a stand in front of him. (I was surprised that modern technology hadn't sneaked its way to the reception there.) Then a young woman appeared, asking to take our coats, before a greying man showed us to our table; he even pulled our chairs out for us. Most tables were full, yet the number of staff almost outnumbered the guests.

The waiter gave us our menus and handed the wine list to Victor. 'I'll be back soon to take your orders. Should you require anything else, I am at your service,' he said and left us.

There were expensive chandeliers with thousands of crystal drops hanging from the ceiling, but the space wasn't bright. The dominant colours in the restaurant were dark red, black, and gold, and I kept squirming in my seat, despite the incredibly soft crimson chairs. The seat and back pads were framed by carved wood painted gold, and the square tables were covered with two layers of tablecloths: a long burgundy one underneath a shorter white one. In the background, classical music was playing – a light and gentle melody, almost ethereal, where the piano was the star, with occasional supporting roles for the violin, cello, and flute.

When I looked at the menu, the first thing that caught my eye was the six large letters printed in crimson in the middle of the black leather cover. It read 'Dante's' – like the first name of the world-famous Italian writer of the mediaeval poem *Divine Comedy*. Yet inside, on the single white page, the menu was in French, which I found comical but divine.

I'd studied French in high school for a couple of years and could still make sense of some of the words. There wasn't much to translate though; the selection appeared limited.

I was used to places with paper napkins – not linen ones, laid out on my lap. And those chain restaurants and cheap pubs I visited offered at least thirty different options. Here there were only four or five dishes listed under both categories: starter and main, but I couldn't make up my mind, unable to get past the prices. Suddenly the cost of those dresses I'd tried on earlier didn't seem so extortionate when compared to the courses I'd likely demolish in minutes.

Victor must have sensed my indecisiveness, as when the waiter returned, he ordered for me in French. I was so fascinated by how beautifully he pronounced the words that I forgot to translate them.

'Very well, sir.'

'And a bottle of the 1999 Cabernet Sauvignon.'

'I'm afraid we only have the 2000.'

'Then that will have to do,' Victor said, slightly annoyed.

The waiter bowed and briskly walked away.

Suddenly, I remembered that I hadn't told the sales assistants about the broken zip. Oh well, it wasn't likely I'd return there, and they wouldn't know where to find me.

'So, Lizzie,' said Victor, 'tell me about yourself.'

'There's not much to tell.' I briefly told him about university, my upcoming exams, and my rather dull work in the supermarket. Then I recounted to him my childhood friendship with Jules and explained that we now lived together, our bond still strong.

'That's so sweet,' he said.

'Why don't you tell me about yourself? I'm sure you have a more exciting life than mine?'

'It's true – I'm always on the road looking for the next opportunity,' he said with a half-smile. He then went on to explain his work at the company, but when I asked for more details, he said it was too complicated and didn't want to bore me.

'So where have you been the past few days?'

'Doing business of course. In Amsterdam.'

'Van Gogh,' I said.

'That's right. Van Gogh was from the Netherlands.'

'I like post-Impressionism. It's my favourite.'

'I like a different kind of art myself,' he said. 'Something a bit more… *exhilarating*.'

Before I could ask him more about his preferences, another instrumental song began – cutting into the soft melody still playing in the background and growing gradually louder, until finally it eclipsed the piano completely. I recognised the tune as 'Bittersweet Symphony' by The Verve.

The low murmur of conversations paused, and expressionless faces turned in my direction; even Victor's eyes grew darker.

'I'm so sorry,' I murmured, pulling out my phone from my bag and switching it off.

'I'm quite hungry now,' I said, trying to restart the conversation. I didn't have a watch, but I was sure we'd been waiting for close to an hour now. They'd served us some bread and canapés, but the portions were on the smaller side, and I was conscious of leaving some for Victor, though he hadn't yet touched anything on the plates.

Victor summoned one of the older waiters.

'Can you please check on our order? This young lady is hungry, and we don't intend to stay the night here.'

'Very well, sir. If I just may say, we pride ourselves that all our meals are freshly prepa—' The waiter paused as Victor cast him a dark look. 'I won't be a minute, sir,' the waiter said quickly and hurried away.

'Honestly, it wasn't necessary. That waiter looked terrified.'

'I have a certain effect on people.'

'So I've noticed,' I said, and he narrowed his eyes.

Two minutes later, the first course finally arrived.

The waiter announced the name in French, but again I didn't pay attention. Instead, I studied the meal in front of me. There was a single small red apple on the white plate. I was tempted to pick it up, but Victor lifted his knife and fork, and so I did the same. I identified the apple skin as some sort of raspberry glaze. Inside the fruit were three layers: the first was ivory-coloured, tasting like parsnip puree, the middle was peanut in shade and flavour, and the core was some sort of meat pâté. All in all, it was okay but lacked seasoning compared to the meals I was used to.

I was almost halfway through the dish before Victor raised the first bite to his lips. With tremendous effort, I slowed down to finish at the same time he did.

Then the waiter appeared to clear our plates and it was a waiting game again.

About twenty minutes later, the second course arrived – a fist-sized piece of light-pink meat swimming in a dark-red sauce, sprinkled with green leaves and flowers. Then the meat changed into a human head and the plate into a tiled floor. Blood covered the floor. *Dark blond curls dipped into a drying puddle of blood.*

'What's this? This isn't what we ordered. And can't you see that the sight of this meal is making the young lady sick? Look how pale she is!'

Victor's sharp voice brought me back from my daze. He sounded furious.

'I'm so sorry, sir. I'll take this straight away.' The waiter picked up the fork and knife that must have fallen out of my hands and then took my plate. His hands were shaking more than mine.

'Apologise to the lady, not to me. And this one as well,' he said, pointing to his own plate. 'I must say, I wouldn't expect

such a colossal mistake from a three-Michelin-star restaurant!' said Victor, still fuming.

'Very well, sir,' the waiter muttered humbly then turned to me. 'My deepest apologies, miss,' he said before bowing and hurrying away.

'Lizzie, are you alright?' Victor asked, taking my hand in his. 'You seemed to be in a state of shock.'

'I'm fine.'

'We can go somewhere else to eat.'

'No, it's fine. I'm sorry – not sure what happened. That sauce looked like blood. I must just be tired.'

'You have no reason to apologise; it's them who messed up the order. But I'll sort this out now,' he said determinedly, throwing his napkin on the table. 'I'll go and speak to the manager about it.'

'Honestly, there's no need—'

He put his hand up to stop me. 'Just leave this to me.' He kicked his chair back and sprang up.

He returned about five minutes later.

'They'll bring us our order now – without any sauce. I made it clear they'd better serve us quickly this time. After all, they've kept us waiting long enough.'

I nodded, but I was positive the growing pain in my stomach had nothing to do with the hunger I'd felt before.

While waiting for the new second course, I tried to distract myself from the images lingering in the back of my mind. Once again, I gazed around the restaurant. In the far corner, I noticed the band and realised we'd been listening to live music. The symphonies had been played to perfection, not a single note played too early or too late, as if they were part of a pre-recorded concert. But the music had turned into a discordant rhapsody, shattering the previously calm mood.

Victor was proved right; we didn't have to wait long for the food. Almost immediately after he'd taken his seat, the manager himself served us a pale combination of long rectangular meat and vegetables pieces arranged like a small Jenga tower,

making sure that everything was fine with the food before he nervously left our table.

During the remainder of the dinner, Victor did the talking, telling me about his latest business venture, something about hotels. I kept prompting him to continue, alternating between a smile and a nod. But I wasn't really paying attention. The vision of dark blond curls dipped in a pool of blood kept flashing through my head…

*

'You're doing it again,' said Jules, and I looked at her. Her skin was a shade darker after arriving back from sunny Cyprus last night.

'Huh?'

'Fidgeting, twisting an imaginary ring on your finger.'

I looked down at my hands. Her description was spot on.

'Weird – I didn't realise I was doing that.'

'My mum used to do that a lot after Dad died. She still does it sometimes when deep in thought. So what is it? What are you thinking about?'

I hesitated but then decided to get it out of my system.

'Have you ever had a very vivid daydream that felt real?' I asked.

'You mean like at work, when I'm dreaming about going on holiday in the Maldives? Canoeing on crystal-blue water and drinking cocktails from a coconut shell while dancing with handsome natives, and then Ryan Gosling arrives?' she sighed dreamily then realised her mistake. 'Don't tell Steve.'

'Not quite. More like a nightmare.'

'So what exactly happened?'

'I don't know. Victor and I were having dinner, and they served me this meal, a piece of meat, and there was a load of sauce… And suddenly, I saw a head lying in a pool of blood.'

'You mean someone was hurt while you were at that restaurant?'

'No, sorry, I'm not explaining it well. The head in the blood *was* the daydream.'

'That's a strange daydream.'

'Exactly – that's my point. You know I don't like horror films and can't stand the sight of blood, so why would I be thinking of such a horrid thing?'

'Who was it?'

'Huh?'

'Whose head was it?'

'I don't know; I didn't see his face. I mean, at the time, I thought it was a boy or a man. The haircut was short. It could have been a woman, I guess. *Am I going mad*?'

'No, you're probably just exhausted. If you're not at work, you're here doing chores or studying for exams. Girl, you really need to stop staying behind at work to cover for others; it doesn't do your health any good.'

'I don't do that anymore,' I protested quickly, but I knew Jules could see through my lie. The truth was I still helped my colleagues out on occasion, but not as much as I used to. Jules was right; I couldn't always prioritise their needs over mine.

The doorbell rang, and I was glad the conversation had halted.

I opened the door; it was a courier.

'Sign here please,' he said, and I scribbled my name down on his electronic pad.

I put the large square box on the floor in the living room. It was big enough to contain a large hoover or a few microwaves, though nowhere near that heavy. There was no note on the outside except my name and address, and it was tightly sealed, so I got a pair of scissors from the kitchen to open it up.

Inside it were four thin rectangular boxes and four shoeboxes. And in each of the thin boxes, neatly folded, lay one of the four dresses I'd tried on the day before. The shoeboxes contained the stilettos the sales assistants had given me to try on with the dresses: a pair of nude heels with a round toe to go with the purple dress; a pointed black pair with a red undersole

to wear with the black dress; white sandals to match the lime-green dress; and silver sandals with silk butterflies attached to the laces that tied at the ankles to complement the silvery-blue dress of my dreams. I quickly checked the zip on the lime-green dress, and it slid down and back with ease.

'These are beautiful,' said Jules. 'Where are they from?'

'From Victor. We went to a boutique before dinner, and he made me try these on.' Or rather, the sales assistants did…

'And he bought them for you?' asked Jules, checking the price tags. Then she looked at me suspiciously. 'You didn't sleep with him, did you?'

'No, of course not!' I said quickly. 'You know I wouldn't do that on the first date – we didn't even kiss.'

The truth was he'd kissed my hand when we'd said goodnight at the restaurant before he'd put me in a cab, but I knew that wasn't something Jules was interested in hearing.

'He's clearly after something. Men don't spend thousands of pounds on gifts for women just to go to dinner with them…'

'It's probably like pennies for him. He is *very* rich. You should have seen the prices at the restaurant. But I agree with you and don't want to feel like I owe him anything.' I said, putting the lids back on the boxes. 'I'll give these back to him.'

'I think you should keep them.'

'But you just said—'

'I said he clearly wants something from you. Is he really that handsome?'

'Very,' I sighed.

'Then perhaps he's what you need. I officially pause the matchmaking until you figure out what you want from him.'

'I think the question is what he wants from me.'

'There's no question about that,' she said with a condescending smile. 'It's time you had some fun with…'

'Victor,' I helped her out.

'Right, Victor.'

'Just make sure you don't get hurt. These rich men tend to keep like a harem of women.'

'I'm not Scheherazade, and he's Spanish, not Arabic.'

'It's not a joke. Just make sure you don't fall for him unless you're sure he's not just playing with you. I don't want to see you heartbroken again.'

'Yes, Mum,' I said, smiling and saluting.

'Maybe you could bring him to Steve's first gig. They'll be playing in Brixton next month.'

Steve was a drummer in a band; this was his latest passion. I hadn't heard him play yet, but Jules said he used to play when he was younger, and they were pretty good.

She glanced at her watch. 'Holy shit, I'm going to be late again. Mum is going to kill me.' She grabbed her bag and disappeared out the door.

I looked at the boxes and wondered when I'd see Victor again – and if he was indeed playing games with me. But I thought perhaps Jules was right: two could play that game, and I was ready to try…

CHAPTER 8

A WHITE CHRISTMAS

'Look, it's snowing again! It looks like it's going to last. I can't believe it – finally a white Christmas!' I exclaimed.

'Ya-ay,' said Matty, but he didn't follow my gaze through the shop window.

'That didn't sound very enthusiastic. What's wrong?'

'It's nothing.'

'Have you received any feedback on that essay you submitted last week?'

'Not yet.'

'How are you getting on with your Christmas shopping?'

'Haven't really started.'

'Well, I'm done with all the wrapping too. I made the mistake of doing a night shift on the twenty-third last year and hadn't done any shopping. I was walking around like a zombie on Christmas Eve to try and get something for everyone before all the shops closed. I was so tired I picked up women's perfume for my brother and a man's scarf for his girlfriend, which worked out okay in the end because at least I could say I'd just mixed up the nametags.'

Matty acknowledged my story with a weak smile.

'Anyway, my shift is over now,' I said, looking up at the clock. 'You okay to carry on without me? And cheer up! I'm sure your essay is fine.'

On my way out, I passed the only manned till and noticed the queue wasn't moving.

'I don't understand. I normally pay forty pounds for this shopping,' said the customer – a short black woman – at the

checkout. She was with a young boy of about seven, a little girl who looked no more than five, and a toddler, who was sitting in the trolley.

'Well, the prices of some of the items have recently gone up slightly,' replied Haylie, the young cashier.

I liked Haylie. She was placid but always nice and polite.

'I see. Just a second,' said the woman, going through her wallet nervously.

'You can pay the balance by card if you like.'

The woman and the children seemed familiar, and it took me a minute, but I finally managed to place them. They were the Williams family, who lived a few houses down from my father's place. She was a widow, and they'd moved into a council house just before I started my master's and moved in with Jules. The area where I'd grown up used to be populated by middle-class families. However, as time passed, property ownership changed significantly, and the neighbourhood became very different.

I looked back at the checkout screen. It said, '£48.29.' I made a step towards the customer and bent down.

'I believe you dropped this,' I said, pressing a ten-pound note in her hands.

'Oh, yes, thank you,' she murmured, embarrassed.

I looked at the children again. The two older ones were hiding behind their mother's long skirt, and the little one was yawning, oblivious to the world around her.

Icy air hit me as I stepped outside, and I quickly buttoned up my coat. Nicholas was waiting for me, leaning against the wall next to the exit. I didn't even bother asking how long he'd been standing in the cold, but this time his lips weren't turning blue, so I suspected he must have just arrived from Costa or some other indoor place. He was wearing a scarf and gloves, finally dressed appropriately for the weather.

'Why did you do that?' he asked, pointing at the automatic doors.

'What are you talking about?'

'I saw you,' he said almost accusingly. 'Why did you give her your money?'

'I don't understand: one minute, you're complaining about humans not caring about one another, then if one shows they do, you're moaning.'

'I'm just curious what made you help her out.'

'Because it was the right thing to do. That's why. And besides, others would have done the same.'

'There were three people behind her, and they didn't do anything. In fact, they were just getting frustrated.' His voice remained calm, but for some reason, his words annoyed me. Based on my previous experience with him, I was prepared for a fight.

'Can you please stop? You're starting to sound like Jules.'

And he did stop talking but not walking. Again, he accompanied me home. He now opened the block doors for me and climbed up the communal stairs to the flat without asking.

*

My boots left deep traces in the snow as I walked back to the house from the corner shop with the groceries my brother had forgotten to buy for Christmas dinner. Sarah and Will had even put some lights on the outside of the house, which made the building look inviting and homely for the first time since Mum's death. Inside, the decorations continued, and when I entered the kitchen with the shopping, Will and I started to reminisce about the happier memories of our childhood.

'I've not seen this much snow since the last time Mum and Dad took us to Scotland – when we were kids. I really enjoyed it there. We should go, the two of us,' he said, looking at Sarah. 'Maybe we could get a long weekend off in February?'

She smiled. 'Yes, definitely. Liz, did you like it there too? Would you like to come with us?'

'Lizzie was too young to remember,' said my brother.

'No, I do remember. I remember the snow, the cabin, and the loch…' My voice trembled.

'Don't tell me you still have nightmares about the loch,' said my brother, suppressing a laugh.

'What nightmares?' asked Sarah.

'When Liz was about six, we played this game called "race to the lodge". We started from the furthest point of the loch; I went one way around it, Liz the other way. I let her do the shorter way, and it was more like a pond than a loch,' he admitted. 'Then Liz tried to take a shortcut over the frozen pond, but the ice cracked under her, and she fell into the water. Luckily, Dad saw what happened and came to rescue her. He jumped in the water after you,' Will said, looking directly at me.

'No, it was Mum who saved me! She pulled me out.'

'It was Mum who pulled you out, but Dad jumped in after you and pushed you to the surface. Dad was doing the hard part of the job. His leg got worse afterwards…'

'Where *is* Joe by the way? Dinner will be ready in a minute,' said Sarah.

'He's probably still asleep. Yesterday was Friday,' I noted.

'Don't be like that, Liz,' Will scolded me. 'Dad's gone over to Mrs Hardy's to check on her. Her son was supposed to come over for Christmas, but he's ill, so he won't be visiting until at least next week.'

'I thought Cora was coming too,' I said, trying to change the subject.

'I spoke to her on the phone an hour ago, and she said they were on their way. She asked me yesterday if she could bring her bodyguard,' said Sarah, looking at her watch.

'Never imagined little Cora would become so famous. I still remember her wearing braces and those ridiculous glasses,' Will said to Sarah. 'And look who's turned into a real hottie from an ugly duckling.'

Cora was ten when her father married Sarah's mother. She was only a couple of years older than me, and we'd sometimes played together before they'd moved away.

The doorbell rang, and Sarah went to answer it.

'You're such an idiot,' I said to Will, shaking my head.

'What have I done now?'

'Hey, guys,' said Cora, taking off her scarf, sunglasses, and brimmed hat. 'Sorry, Colin had trouble getting rid of some paparazzi at the hotel.'

A tall young man stood behind Cora. He reminded me of a young Schwarzenegger. Although handsome, he had too many muscles and a too-square face for my taste.

'I hope it's okay that I brought Colin with me, but I'm just so used to never going anywhere without him,' said Cora.

'Of course! I told you, it's fine.' Sarah smiled, squeezing Cora's shoulder. 'Liz, I think the turkey is ready. Can you help me take it out?'

With Colin's help, Will extended the dining table in the kitchen so there was room for all the food. By the time dinner was served, Dad had joined us too. He sat at one end of the table while Will took the opposite end. Next to Will sat Sarah, then Cora, then Colin. I sat opposite Sarah, leaving two empty seats between me and Dad.

'So, Liz, what have you been up to?' asked Sarah. 'Any new paintings?'

'No, I haven't had much time to paint. I've been busy with university and work.'

'Oh, I see. And how's university going?'

'Alright. Got some exams coming up in January.'

'This is delicious,' Cora said, smiling, after she'd tasted a small meatball I'd prepared.

'It's not bad, but I wish I could cook like Mum,' I said.

'What are you talking about?' asked my brother. 'Mum was a terrible cook. She couldn't even boil an egg properly. You're a master chef compared to her.'

'Will, how can you say that?' I tried to contain my anger. 'She made the best Sunday lunch ever.'

'Erm… you're wrong. That was Grandma. She used to come over for the weekend. Don't you remember? She used to stay in your room, and you and I had to share mine. Anyway, when Grandma died, Dad took over the cooking.'

I almost looked in my father's direction to see what he had to say about that, but then the doorbell rang again.

We'd just started eating and I was starving, but I decided to open the door to allow me to count to five before I spoke again.

It was Nicholas.

'Merry Christmas,' he said, as if the words were alien to him. He awkwardly passed me a square box about the size of a Rubik's Cube. It was wrapped in plain brown paper.

'What's this?'

'A present for you. That's what… *you* do this time of year?'

I appreciated that he was making an effort not to say 'humans' for once.

'Thank you,' I said, surprised. 'You could have given it to me yesterday when you walked me home; you shouldn't have come all the way from Morden for this.'

He shrugged. 'It wasn't ready then.' He turned to leave.

'Wait! I have something for you. But I haven't wrapped it yet.'

'You do?'

'Yes.'

'Just hang on a second. It's in my bag,' I said, stepping back into the hallway. Upon seeing Milton's *Paradise Lost* in a charity shop a few days back, he'd come to my mind (probably because he'd been lurking outside the shop at the time). I'd bought the book as it looked like it had never been opened.

I'd heard of Milton at school and challenged myself to read the epic poem at thirteen or fourteen. Though I forced myself to suffer through the story, I'd been more preoccupied with completing the challenge than paying attention to and trying to understand the old-fashioned narrative and rhymes. I didn't know why I hadn't taken it out of my bag yet, but now I was glad for my forgetfulness.

'There you go,' I said. 'Hope you haven't read it yet.'

'No, not this one.'

I thought it would be rude to shut the door in his face after exchanging presents, so I asked, 'Are you planning on doing anything this Christmas? Have you any traditions?'

He was quiet, just looking at me with shrewd eyes.

'What's Helen making for Christmas dinner?'

He just kept staring, and I had the bad feeling he planned on spending the entire festive period loitering outside Dad's house.

'Erm, do you want to come in for a bit?' I asked.

He contemplated my offer for a minute then came in the house, and I took his jacket. He wore a thick black hooded jumper underneath, suggesting my suspicions had been correct.

I introduced him as a friend who'd popped by to say hello, and after finding out he hadn't planned much for Christmas, I'd asked him to join us for dinner. No one objected, and he took the seat next to mine.

Nicholas looked overwhelmed by the amount of food in front of him – Sarah and I had cooked enough to feed an army. I had to prompt Nicholas to put more on his plate.

The conversation about sports resumed between my father and Colin, and Sarah and I listened as Cora told us about the spring photoshoots and commercials she'd booked in Milan and Mexico.

The doorbell rang again, and this time Sarah got up to answer the door.

'Someone for you again, Liz,' she said as she returned to the kitchen, followed by a dark shadow.

'Hello, everyone! I'm sorry – I didn't mean to intrude on your festive dinner,' said Victor with a charming smile, but his face turned sour when he saw Nicholas sitting next to me. 'I just came to see Lizzie. I was hoping to steal her for a second.'

Cora said 'hi' to Victor, expressing her surprise seeing him at our house, then did the introductions around the table, introducing Nicholas as a friend of mine. Will and Colin remained quiet. Nicholas had his usual upset expression on, and I didn't look at my father, but I could hear him chewing his food.

'Excuse us for a minute,' I said, leading Victor into the living room.

'How did you know where to find me?' I asked when I'd closed the door behind us.

'I popped by your flat earlier, and your friend told me. I just wanted to give you this,' he said. 'Merry Christmas, gorgeous!'

He handed me a black Gucci gift bag. I opened it to see a square red velvet box. Inside was a small golden watch, like a bracelet, with little translucent stones on the sides of the straps. The dial was framed by two golden snakes with red stone eyes, and four more translucent stones on their bodies. The inscription on the back read, 'Your Beauty is Timeless.'

'I don't know what to say. It's – it's beautiful,' I muttered. 'I feel terrible I didn't get you anything…'

'Don't worry, darling; I'm not after material things.' He smiled, and I wondered what on earth I could have bought him anyway that he didn't already own. I could never have afforded anything like a Dior leather bag or a Chanel jumper – thought he must have had dozens of those already.

He fastened the watch on my wrist and kissed my hand. His lips were hot, and for a second, I toyed with the idea of what it would feel like if he'd pressed them against my lips instead. A chill ran through me at the thought.

'I don't want to keep you from your family. I've already taken up too much of your time…' he said, his gaze holding mine.

'Would you like to stay? I'm sure we can make space for one more at the table.' I thought it would be rude to just kick him out after receiving his generous gift. There was still plenty of food to go around. Sarah would definitely not need to cook for a while…

'What about your friend?'

'Nicholas? As you said: he's just a friend.'

Technically he hadn't even reached that status, but I didn't want to tell Victor how I knew Nicholas. It was rather complicated and ridiculous. I hadn't even told my family about Nicholas's medical problems, and I was hoping it wouldn't come up.

I realised I'd left him alone with my family for almost five minutes now and felt the sudden urge to run back to the dining room and check on the situation.

'But maybe another time,' I offered quickly to end the conversation. 'It was lovely to see you, and thanks for the watch.'

At the front door, we agreed on a date for the first Tuesday in January, following his next business trip. He kissed my hand again, we said goodbye, and he left. I didn't wait for him to get in the red Ferrari parked in front of our house; I shut the door and rushed back to the dining room. I hadn't missed much though. Nicholas looked at me shrewdly, picking at the food on his plate. All other eyes – except my father's – were on me too as I entered the room and took my seat.

'Everything okay?' asked Sarah.

'Yes,' I said. 'Victor just came to give me a Christmas present.' I held out my left hand, slightly shaking it to show off the watch.

'Holy cow!' exclaimed my brother, grabbing my hand. 'It's a designer watch, right? It looks like real gold. It must be worth a fortune. You could sell it and buy a house.'

I thought Will was exaggerating – it was perhaps gold-plated only, but it did feel quite heavy. If my brother was right and the watch was pure gold, then maybe the stones were genuine too, like diamonds… I felt even worse owing Victor now. I should never have accepted the watch.

'I'm not going to sell it. It was a present.'

'Cora, what do you think?' Will asked, showing her my wrist and twisting the watch.

He obviously thought she could tell the difference between different types of gold jewellery, but Cora misunderstood his question.

'It's very pretty,' she agreed; her mind seemed to be somewhere else.

'Ooh, that's a nasty mark. Do you want me to have a look at it for you?' asked Sarah. It was handy having a medical professional in the family, and she loved caring for everyone.

'Don't worry, Liz always burns herself in the kitchen – right, Liz?' said my brother mockingly. 'I'm surprised she's still in one piece.'

'It's nothing,' I said, quickly retracting my hand. 'It's an old one.'

The truth was I couldn't remember where or how I'd obtained the strange scar on my wrist, but it had been there for a few months now. It was large enough to be seen under the bracelet, shaped like three snails crawling after each other, and it sat right next to the scar that was testament to my contribution to last Christmas's dinner.

'We were just telling Colin how much Cora has changed,' said my brother. 'That she used to be an ugly duckling.'

Here we go again. When would my brother learn how to – or rather how not to – talk about attractive women in front of his own wife?

'Liz was the same,' he continued, 'skinny and awkward. I remember her running home from school crying that the girls in her class had been teasing her about her looks.'

'Bullying is a better word,' I pointed out, 'but thanks, Will.' I tried to think of something I could use to put him on the spot too, but my father spoke before me.

'So, Colin, are you from around here?'

'Kent originally. My parents still live there, but my sister moved to Canada with her family.'

'It must be difficult for you to spend Christmas with strangers – the same goes for you, Nicholas,' said Sarah kindly.

'I have no complaints about the company,' Colin replied with a smile, looking at Cora, but Nicholas didn't comment.

There was chocolate yule log and strawberry trifle for dessert. Dad had banned Christmas pudding years ago, as serving it properly would have involved setting fire to it. I opted for the cake; Sarah, Colin, and my father chose the trifle; and my brother wanted a bit of both. Nicholas didn't mind, so I also put some of both on his plate. Cora declined dessert – she hadn't eaten much of the mains either, but she'd been chewing on each mouthful longer than anyone else around the table and rubbing her stomach like she was full. Though, after saying 'no' to pudding, her eyes still lingered on the cake for a minute longer.

When we'd finished eating, Cora left with Colin, and my father went to the living room with Will, dragging Nicholas with them while I stayed behind to help Sarah clean up. I had fewer qualms about the boys being without me now that we'd survived dinner without incident.

'He seems nice,' Sarah said quietly.

'Nicholas? I guess.'

'Very quiet, but they do say opposites attract. How did you meet?'

I shrugged. 'We go to the same places – you know, like university. But he's just a friend,' I said. 'How's the house-hunting going?'

'It's going okay. Something will come up soon,' Sarah replied, forcing a smile, but she didn't sound very optimistic. I decided not to bombard her with more questions – she'd been cooking all day and had worked long hours the previous day.

Once we'd tidied up, we joined the men in the living room. They'd been watching a dark comedy series on TV, and my brother was laughing his head off. Nicholas was frowning, seemingly not understanding the programme, while my father sat in silence.

Now that we were all together, it was time for the family to open presents from each other. It occurred to me that this could get quite awkward with Nicholas, however, as Sarah and I sat down, he abruptly got up and thanked my family for having him.

'I'll be around,' he said to me as I saw him out, and I knew he meant it literally; I just hoped his clothes were indeed warm enough.

The carefully wrapped packages contained nothing exciting for any of us; it seemed we'd all been operating on the same wavelength when doing our Christmas shopping, the main themes being practical and boring. I got some hand warmers and a new blue dressing gown from my brother and Sarah, and a couple of books (that I'd already read) and a pair of pyjamas from my father.

As per family tradition, we watched a Christmas movie afterwards – this year's winner being *Scrooged* – then everyone retired to their rooms early, but I couldn't fall asleep. After half an hour of tossing and turning, I realised what was bothering me: I still had a present to open. I'd put the box Nicholas had given me in my bag when I'd been looking for the book for him.

Excited, I went downstairs and fished the package out of my bag. My enthusiasm quickly vanished though. The box contained a plain brown mug. Sigh. *And I traded my mint-condition Milton for this?*

Sleep seemed unlikely to come anytime soon, so I decided to make tea, put the ugly mug to good use, and read for a while.

As I sat down in the living room, opening one of my mother's copies of her beloved *Pride and Prejudice* and lifting the hot drink to my lips, my eyes caught something white in my peripheral vision. I held the mug a bit further away. The rim had lightened up, and the ugly brown colour was gradually disappearing towards the bottom. I couldn't believe my eyes when it vanished completely. In less than a minute, the boring brown mug had transformed into the most magical and thoughtful present I'd ever been given. It was decorated with a painting – *Sunflowers* by Van Gogh.

CHAPTER 9

FORE/PLAY

Although I had a date scheduled with Victor for that evening, after showering and getting dressed, I waved to Nicholas to come up, as the temperature was now below freezing. I felt mean for leaving him at the block entrance earlier, but I was determined to get rid of him before my date arrived.

I was going to the cinema with Victor, but there'd been no mention of dinner, so I made Nicholas and myself a quick bite. I didn't want to eat too much as I was looking forward to demolishing a large popcorn.

When we'd finished dinner, we still had almost half an hour before Victor was supposed to pick me up. Based on our first date, I expected him to turn up late, but I was hoping we wouldn't miss the start of the film and I'd have time to grab my salty snack.

Tonight, I'd made sure the flat was tidy in case Victor came in. No books and papers lay on top of the coffee table, providing an unobstructed view of its lower shelf. Sitting on the sofa, Nicholas kept eyeing the large chessboard that sat there. After a few minutes, I decided to put him out of his misery.

'Do you play?'

'I know the rules,' he replied.

We still had time for a quick game, so I set up the board on the coffee table. Although Nicholas was clearly a beginner, he picked up the rhythm of the game and the different strategies quickly. I was about to beat him for a third time when the doorbell rang. I opened the door and found Victor standing

there in a black tuxedo. He smiled at me, but his look wasn't quite what I'd hoped for as he measured me up.

'Hi, Victor. I thought you said we were going to the cinema.' I tried to sound casual about the fact I'd put on only dark jeans and a long-sleeved sparkly top. After showing off my best feminine side (aka my legs) on the first date, I thought I could get away with trousers and a nice top on the second, considering it we were meant to be watching a film in the dark. We were experiencing the worst of winter, and I was sure even Jules wouldn't have wanted me to become a real ice queen. Although it still wasn't a sensible choice, I'd chosen the boat-neck top to show off some skin in case we went for a drink after the film.

'I did say we were going to a movie premiere…'

'I see,' I said, embarrassed, as I realised he must have meant a red-carpet event.

He forced a smile, measuring up my attire again, then he raised his head, looking deep into my eyes. 'I'm sure you'd look stunning in that purple dress.'

I felt the sudden urge to please him; to look my best next to this dashing, dark James Bond.

'Come in,' I said, opening the door wider. 'I'll run and get changed.'

'Oh, and who have we got here? It's your friend from the other day, isn't it?'

I'd completely forgotten about Nicholas and detected some hostility in Victor's voice.

'Nicholas was just leaving,' I replied, but he made no move to get up from his seat and was eyeing Victor back.

'No need to rush,' said Victor. 'I see you've been busy. Maybe your friend and I can play a quick game while you're getting ready.'

I pursed my lips but nodded.

A millionaire and a madman playing chess in our living room – what a bizarre scene, I thought, squeezing myself into the dress he'd bought for me. When I'd tried it on a month ago, it had seemed the right size, even slightly loose, but now I felt suffocated.

After I'd managed to pull the zip up, I forced my feet into the nude stilettos, then went to the bathroom to adjust my make-up. I was wearing a teal eyeshadow but, though it made my eyes pop, it didn't look quite right against the dark purple of the dress.

It took me around five or ten minutes to achieve a complete makeover. Checking myself in the hallway mirror, I sucked in my stomach, pasted on a smile, and returned to the living room, where the two men were still engrossed in the game.

'… it's a dirty game you're playing. You won't win this time,' said Nicholas.

'Just chill. You can't stop me now – you know the rules. And why do you think the name's Victor?'

'I only care about what I have to do. You're nothing but talk. You should just focus on your own moves.'

'You know you're playing with fire. I'm watching you; one wrong step, and I'll be right behind you. You still have a lot to learn. I've been doing this longer than you could imagine. I'm already on top of my game. But you know, we aren't that dissimilar, you and I. We both want the same thing; it's just the approach that's different – I have style.'

'You're a cheat.'

'You're angry because I'm a better player than you, and you didn't see me coming. Don't forget I always get what I want.'

'You don't play fair.'

Victor laughed. 'Oh, I'm more than fair – you should know that by now. Not all your opponents would have given it this much time. This game will be over soon. Tick tock, tick tock. I don't know why you still keep trying to defend your queen. You should just go back to your king now before it gets any worse. Leave the peasants behind. They don't deserve any protection – you know that. Just give up now. You're just a sad little loser.'

'It's not over yet. Sooner or later, your king will fall. Check.' Nicholas's voice was full of anger, and he was chewing on his lips. He'd yet to notice the mistake with his knight I'd already spotted.

'Sorry to interrupt, but we should be leaving now. Otherwise we'll be late,' I said, looking at the clock on the wall. 'Maybe you can carry on some other day?'

'It's fine, darling, we were just finishing here, weren't we, my friend? Checkmate.'

Nicholas' eyes widened in horror as Victor swept the white king off the board, and he jumped up from the sofa, his face red with rage. He looked at me as if to say something, then changed his mind and stormed out of the flat.

Victor got up, tidied his tuxedo, and did up his bow tie. I hadn't even noticed he'd taken it off.

'Your friend is a little sensitive. He loses badly. I hope he'll get over it soon. But his loss is my gain,' said Victor, smiling before he dropped a warm kiss on my hand. 'Let's go.'

*

It was nearly eleven o'clock when the movie ended, and all I wanted was to go home and get out of the dress. Although Victor had promised to take me home following the end credits, it was another half hour after the movie ended before we got to leave. At least I'd managed to escape to the ladies' room for a few minutes to ease myself and breathe.

When we got back to the flat, Victor walked me to the double doors, and as we were saying goodbye, he leaned in to kiss me – the kiss I'd been waiting for, the kiss I'd been craving… But instead of offering my lips to him, I ducked out of his way.

Had I not seen Nicholas's blond head when we were walking to the block, perhaps the evening would have turned out differently. But I had, even if it was just a brief glimpse, and I couldn't bear the idea of being watched during an intimate moment with my date. I wished I'd asked Victor to walk me upstairs, but then he'd have likely thought I was too easy, and it wouldn't have ended with a kiss…

'I'm sorry,' I said, and I was truly regretful. 'I'm just not ready.'

'It's okay. The most satisfying things are always worth waiting for,' he said, though his smile didn't seem completely honest to me.

'Thank you for a wonderful evening.'

Walking upstairs to the flat, I thought I'd just ruined my chances of seeing him again.

When I finally got out of the dress in my bedroom, I checked the label on it. No wonder I'd been close to dying of suffocation all night – I'd been sent the size six.

CHAPTER 10
WHISTLING WOODS

'What's this?' asked Jules, pointing at the envelope on the bistro table.

'That's just a collection at work for Paula's birthday. It's in two weeks. I was thinking about getting her a spa voucher or something,' I said as I picked it up and put it in my bag.

'Is that the woman who keeps asking you to swap shifts with her?'

I nodded. 'Yeah, she's a single mother and struggles with childcare sometimes. But she hasn't asked recently.'

She was quiet for a second, looking at me with concern. 'I see. And what's that guy called? Phil, right? You say you keep covering for him when he decides to extend his lunchtime, and you don't get paid overtime for staying behind.'

'I haven't told my boss about it because I don't want to get Phil in trouble, so of course I won't get paid for that.'

'Liz, please, just listen to yourself…'

'What?'

She sighed. 'I'm just worried about you… I haven't heard once from you that someone had done anything for you either at work or university,' she said, looking at me with doe eyes. 'But you keep running around for others and trying to please them without looking after yourself first. Why do you care so much about what other people think of you?'

'I don't.'

'Yes you do. You've been like this ever since I've known you. But it's time you stopped thinking about others. You need to

put yourself first.'

'It's not like I'm expecting anything in return,' I added. 'Doing things for others makes me happy.' I liked to feel useful and please others – I didn't see why that was so bad. It was true, though, that no one ever offered to help me, but I'd never really asked for it either.

'No it doesn't. Are you trying to convince me or yourself?' She sighed again, making me waver in my belief that I enjoyed helping out. 'And I hate to see you get disappointed over and over again like at school…'

She was referring to the posh girls who went on to tease me about my clothes and hair after I'd helped with their art homework. I'd just wanted to blend in with them, but it seemed I could do nothing to make them like me.

'So what do you want me to do? Turn my back on anyone who ever asks me for a favour?'

'You're always going to extremes. You should just learn to say "no" once in a while, and if it was me, I'd start calling in some favours. Your exams are coming up, and you'll need some time to prepare. I do hope I'm wrong about your colleagues.'

When I didn't say a word, she changed the subject.

'So how was the movie the other night?'

'It was alright.'

'You don't sound like you had a good time.'

'The film was pretty depressing, but other than that, it was fine. It was a premiere, and I got to see some famous people I think – or at least their backs,' I said, not too convinced.

I didn't want to moan too much to her, as what would I be complaining about? That a rich, handsome man had taken me out in a fancy limousine to mingle with A-listers? It wasn't Victor's fault my dress had been too tight. 'It was some historical biographical drama about surviving the Second World War.'

'That's why women should never let men pick the movie. There are so many good films out there that everyone can enjoy, but men always seem to go for the boring stuff.'

'*Independence Day*.' The words just slipped out of my mouth, and I had no idea why that was the first title that had come to mind.

'Now that's a good film, but I'd go for *The Notebook* or *Shutter Island* any day,' she said. 'Was Leo or Ryan there by any chance?'

'I don't think so. Only a couple of the actors, the director, and some other staff who'd been working on the film,' I said. It came out quite big-headed, as if I was used to seeing such celebrities every day. But ultimately, they were only human beings, so I didn't understand the big fuss. I kind of felt sorry for them not having much privacy and always being in the spotlight.

'How are things going with Victor?'

'Okay, I guess. I was thinking about taking extra shifts at work to be able to pay if he takes me out again, but I don't think he'd let me.'

'He sounds like a real gentleman. Steve used to be like that… And now he's saving all the money he earns for better instruments and marketing his band. There's actually something I wanted to talk to you about…'

'Sure, what is it?'

'Steve and I've been thinking about moving in together…'

'Oh, that's great news.'

Her hesitation before she went on made me nervous. 'Thanks, and we were thinking that this flat could be big enough for all three of us.'

I laughed with relief. 'For a second, I thought this was going to be like that scene from *Friends* when Monica and Chandler tell Rachel to move out,' I said.

'Oh God, no! I'm not ready to live with a boy all by myself. And who would do the cooking? You know I'm terrible at it. I bake a little but cook… nah!'

It was a lie but a good attempt at reassuring me I wouldn't be discarded just yet.

'And how's Steve's band doing?'

'They're fine; they've now written some songs. I think I told you they're playing in Brixton on the twelfth – please say you can make it.'

'That's next Wednesday, right? I wouldn't miss it for the world.'

'There you go,' she said, fishing out a folded piece of coloured A5 paper from her bag.

I frowned as I read the leaflet. 'Whistling Woods?' It didn't sound like a jazz band.

She shrugged. 'Don't ask me – his mates chose the name,' she said, as if reading my mind.

'A carpenter turned drummer. There'll be lots of life experience to tell the grandchildren about.'

'What grandchildren? We're not even engaged, and at this rate, we'll never have the money to get married anyway.'

'What about a small wedding at the registry office? Just you two and two witnesses?'

'You know that's not an option. Mum would kill me if I didn't invite all my brothers and seventeen cousins with all their families. And Steve is Irish…' She waved a hand as if to say there was no point talking about it anymore. It did seem there was a lot of maths and politics involved in their future – I didn't envy them.

'So when's Steve going to move in?'

'His rent is up at the end of this month, but if it's okay with you, he'll start moving his stuff this weekend. He really doesn't get on well with his flatmates; they keep nicking his tools and stuff.'

'Not much time left then.'

'He hasn't got much to move; it's mainly clothes. His drum kit will stay in his mate's garage.'

'Let me know if you need any help with moving.'

'Thanks; I think we'll be fine. But back to Victor – any juicy details to share?'

'Let's just go, and I'll tell you about it on the way. I don't want to be late again.'

'Forgot my wallet. Just a sec.'

She went back into the flat three more times – once to use the toilet, once for her phone, and the third time for her scarf – before we were finally able to leave.

Of course, we ended up being a couple of minutes late – again – for the first lecture. We had to sneak into the benches to avoid drawing too much attention to ourselves. At least we made it by the time the register was taken.

Jules finished her classes earlier than me and had gone to work by the time my last seminar was over. Being a Thursday, I wasn't due at work, so I had the evening to myself.

I decided to go to my favourite cinema in Richmond to compensate for losing out on popcorn two days earlier, and to hopefully see a film that wouldn't make me want to shoot myself in the head.

It was a long walk from Roehampton through Richmond Park. I enjoyed the tranquillity as I walked along the narrow paths framed with woodland and meadows, the wind whistling through the trees. It was dark already, but the park was well lit. In the artificial light, it felt like being on a theatre stage.

Suddenly a man in black was blocking my way. It looked like he was holding a silver knife – I froze. He clicked it, and I realised it was a pen.

'Hello, sorry, didn't mean to startle you. Would you like to sign up for our charity run in the park next Friday?' he asked, pushing a clipboard in my face.

I politely declined and continued to the cinema. I got lucky: they were screening nineties blockbusters all week, and tonight's showing was my favourite film: *Forrest Gump*. The building was more of an art house, with creaky old chairs and carpets that had seen better days, but I preferred this little cinema to the soulless multiplexes.

While studying the movie posters and next month's show list on the wall in the lobby, I saw a young blond man entering the cinema and taking an armchair in the far corner of the lobby.

'You might as well watch the film with me,' I said, walking up to Nicholas. He'd come prepared, a thin book in his hands, but I couldn't see the title.

'You didn't come to find me after classes.'

'Well, you've found me alright, so nothing to complain about.'

He slid the book into the inside pocket of his jacket then reluctantly queued with me for tickets and refreshments, including a large popcorn. I felt embarrassed when he started eyeing the other cinemagoers around us with disgust. I was about to pay when we finally got served, but Nicholas was faster. He'd already handed a couple of banknotes to the cashier before I could open my wallet.

'Where did you get money from? Did you steal it?' I asked quietly as we walked to the screen.

'No.'

'Tell me.'

He didn't respond.

'Fine, don't tell me then.'

We took our chairs a few minutes before the trailers started. To me, watching movies in the cinema without the trailers was like having sex without foreplay – it could never be fully satisfying with no build-up to the main event.

We didn't talk during the film, and I'd never seen anyone watching a movie with such a sceptical yet wooden expression. I offered him some popcorn, but he didn't touch it, which was fine with me – food was the only thing I preferred not to share.

'So what did you think of the film?' I asked as we left the cinema.

He shrugged. 'It's typical of humans to try to rewrite their history.'

'That's just the entertainment part of it. I actually find it quite clever how the filmmakers found a way to connect the main character with all those real-life events.'

'I wasn't talking about that.'

'What did you mean then?'

'Never mind.'

'Why do you hate people so much?' I asked. I decided to go along with his game just to see where it led. I'd never engaged in conversations with mentally disturbed people before and wanted to have a better understanding of how his mind worked.

'I don't. I'm not able to feel. That's a privilege for humans only.'

'How can that be true? I can see you're angry at us. I can see the contempt on your face when you look at us. What is it you don't like about us? What have we ever done to you?'

'I think, not feel.'

'So what do you think of us then?'

'You really want to know? Okay. You've been given the greatest gift in the world, and what do you use it for? You make war; you kill each other. You starve and torture each other. You betray each other. And He still loves you… He *still* loves you! You deny His name, His existence, and He forgives you.'

'You're jealous of us,' I whispered, confused by the realisation. 'Then why don't you go back where you came from? We don't need you – I don't need you.'

'That's not an option for me. It doesn't matter what I think. I have to follow orders.'

'What happens if you don't? I thought angels had free will too.'

He pulled a face. 'It's not that simple.'

'Then come on – what happens if you don't do what you're told?'

He shrugged as if it was nothing. 'I get punished.'

'How?' I had to repeat the question before he replied.

'He won't let me back anymore.'

'So what have you done to end up being sent here? Is he punishing you for something right now?'

'I have a mission.'

'What mission? What are you talking about?'

'You. I have to help you.'

'Help me do what? And can you not just help me in your invisible angel form?'

'It's not my choice.'

'So if you fail, He won't let you back *there* anymore? I see. You know it would be a lot easier for both of us if you told me what exactly you're trying to help me with.'

'I can't.'

'Then you have to stop acting like a spoiled child. How old are you anyway?'

'This body is twenty-four human years old.'

'I'm not talking about the body – I'm talking about *you*.'

'I'm one of the youngest.'

'What does that mean? Thousands of years? Millions?'

'I can't tell you how many human years I've existed for. We don't keep track of that.'

'You must have seen quite a lot then, eh? There's something I've always wanted to know… Is the story of Adam and Eve really true? Let me guess, it's confidential information, isn't it. Did you follow anyone famous like Julius Caesar, Shakespeare, or Napoleon? Hitler, Elvis, no?'

'You're my first,' he said, not picking up on my sarcasm.

'Your first what? Oh, I'm the first one you've been appointed to guard?' He nodded. 'But you say you've existed for God knows how long. Sorry, wrong choice of words. So what were you doing before? Before becoming a guardian angel.'

I could barely say the last two words without bursting into laughter. At the same time, I pitied him even more, for he seemed convinced of his supernatural identity. He was indeed beyond help…

'I was a gatekeeper.'

'Ahh, you mean like standing at the doors of Heaven and deciding who can go in and out?' I covered my mouth with my palm and tried to look as if I was seriously considering what he was saying, but I couldn't contain myself for much longer.

'No one leaves Heaven once they're in. And not quite. God decides who enters. We just follow His orders.'

'Is this like a promotion for you then?' I asked and wished that I'd been recording this conversation. I could have listened

to it later with Jules (should this farce ever end), analysing all the silliness.

'What happens if you can't go back? Would you die?'

'Worse.'

'You'd go to Hell?'

'Worse.'

'What can be worse than that?'

'I'll become a human.'

I lost it then. I turned away from him and buried my face in my hands. My whole body was shaking. He must have thought I was crying because when I finally composed myself and turned back to him, he looked at me, concerned, as if I was the one needing medical attention.

'For someone who hates humans, it must sound awful,' I said and cleared my throat. 'You know what I think? He might have sent you here because you're already like one of us.'

'I don't understand what you mean.'

'I think, although you're not allowed to feel, you feel more than most of us. Hatred and anger are very strong emotions,' I said with feigned seriousness.

'I said I couldn't feel. Emotions are the problem with your world – look where they've got you.'

'I think you feel without even realising it.'

'We shouldn't talk about me.'

The game was over. I didn't feel like laughing at him anymore, and I scolded myself for being so mean. Although definitely a nutcase, he seemed utterly harmless.

'Alright,' I sighed, 'but if you want to stick around, you must try to look less miserable and be a bit nicer. Or just a bit less miserable will do.'

It was a clear cold night, and he walked me back to the flat. I didn't invite him in as it was already quite late, and he seemed okay with that. Wandering through the park in the dark felt safer with someone beside me, even if that person was deranged. It could have been worse though – at least he wasn't a Hannibal Lecter or a Ted Bundy.

CHAPTER 11
LECTURED

'Matty, I need to ask you a favour,' I said after patiently listening to him talk about his latest romantic conquests and plans to attend fashion school. 'Can you swap shifts with me please? I'm on the rota for Wednesday, but I really need it off. Not the whole day; the last four hours are enough. I know it's last minute, but I can take your shift next Friday or stay longer on Saturday and do your evening one.'

'I'm sorry, Liz,' he said, 'this Wednesday's my mum's fiftieth birthday. We've booked a restaurant for the family. It's going to be a big get-together, like twenty of us. If it was any other day, you know I'd do it for you…'

Looking at his apologetic expression, I believed him, but his empathy was no good to me.

He added, 'Perhaps you could ask Paula or Phil.'

'No worries; I'll speak to them. Thanks. And hope your mum has a good one.'

I approached Paula in the locker room that evening before she started her shift.

'You scared me,' she said, jumping up from a bench as I approached. She quickly turned the key on her locker and put it in her pocket.

'Sorry, didn't mean to,' I said. 'Hey, Paula, listen, would you be able to swap this Wednesday with me please?'

She frowned. 'So sorry, honey, I can't. I've got the kids to look after.'

'Didn't you say your ex had them on Wednesday evenings?'

I asked.

'Nah, you've got it mixed up,' she said nervously, rushing for the door. 'Anyway, I've gotta go and stock up the toiletries. Speak later, hun.'

Phil was on holiday and wasn't meant to be at work until Monday. I didn't have his number, so I had to wait to talk to him. As I wasn't working that day, I had to skip the last two lectures just to pop into the supermarket and see him before he finished his shift at five. I didn't have time to look for Nicholas to let him know where I was going, and he still didn't have a phone, but I was sure he'd find me sooner or later.

I couldn't find Phil in his section, so I strolled around the store and finally located him in the far corner near the DVDs. He was being friendly and chatty with two giggling girls who didn't seem much older than me.

Phil was in his mid-thirties, but I knew he still lived with his parents. I could see why the girls were fascinated by him though; he had a big boyish face, light brown hair, and watery blue eyes, and his oversized biceps and orange tan were a natural magnet for certain types of girls.

I cleared my throat, but they didn't seem to notice me. I walked closer.

'Sorry to interrupt, Phil. Could I speak to you for a moment?'

'Hey, what's up, Liz? I'm just discussing some good movie options for Valentine's Day with the ladies.'

'I'm sure that's all very… interesting, but I just need a minute of your time please.'

'Well, ladies, as you can see, a good employee is always in demand, but don't move,' he said, winking at them. 'I'll be back in a sec.'

I led him to the far end of the aisle.

'What's so urgent that you had to drag me away from my customers? And aren't you supposed to be off today?' he asked.

From what I'd seen, buying films was the last thing on those girls' minds, and it had clearly escaped his attention that I wasn't wearing a uniform.

I presented my problem to Phil, but he didn't seem very sympathetic no matter how much I begged and despite offering to do two long shifts for him in return.

'Come on, Liz – you know I'm busy in the evenings. Or at least, I sure will be,' he said, turning his head back towards the girls and winking at them again. The girls blushed and giggled.

'I see. I'm sorry I asked. You'd better get back to your ladies then— erm, I mean your customers.'

Phil gave me a charming smile and shot me some finger guns. Then off he went back to the DVD section.

I left the shop, wondering what I'd tell Jules. I'd promised her I'd be at the club on Wednesday. *How can I now tell her I can't keep that promise?*

After walking a few yards along the high street, I turned around.

'Come on – you might as well walk with me. You know I don't like having a shadow. You probably heard it all, so please don't say a word. I really don't need another lecture.'

I waited, and Nicholas caught up with me quickly.

'Please don't look at me like that. I don't need your pity,' I said.

'I don't feel. We've discussed that before.'

'Then look in the mirror please. You look like you're about to go to a funeral.'

I could see from the corner of my eye that he was still glancing in my direction. 'Oh, come on – I can't bear you staring at me like that! Fine, I'll say it then: you and Jules were right. No one gives a damn about me. Are you happy now?'

'Why would that make me happy?'

'I'm such an idiot! Jules was right – these people aren't my friends; they just use me. I've already done a collection for Paula's birthday for next week, but that's it. After that, I'm calling it a day. I'm not doing anything nice for anyone anymore.'

'Is that going to make you happy?'

'What?'

'If you stop being nice?'

'Maybe – I haven't tried it,' I said, but he was still looking at me sceptically, so I added, 'Now what?'

'You really think that's the solution here?'

'What else could be? You witnessed what just happened. I know you were there – I saw you… despite the fact I've told you never to come into my workplace!'

I let out a deep sigh. 'Anyway, let's just go.'

*

Instead of heading for the flat, I led Nicholas to my family home near Wimbledon Common. He hadn't asked where we were going, so we walked in silence. When we reached the house, he hung back at the gate. I tried to put my key in the lock, but it wouldn't turn – there seemed to be another key in the keyhole from the inside. I rang the bell.

'Hi, Liz, nice to see you. Is everything okay?' Sarah opened the door; she was wearing her nurse uniform.

'Hi, Sarah. Yeah, I just came to pick something up.'

'Sure, come in.'

It felt weird being invited into the house where I'd spent eighteen years of my life…

I climbed the stairs and within a minute had found the reference book I was looking for on a shelf. As I was leaving the room, I saw my art pad on my desk and picked that up too, along with a few pencils.

Then I realised there wasn't space in my bag for everything. I glanced around and spotted the old hippy-style canvas bag with an Indian geometrical motif I'd got from Jules for my fifteenth birthday. It was hanging from a hook on the back of the bedroom door.

As I packed the art materials and the book into the bag, my hand brushed a small, crinkled piece of faded paper. I smoothed it out to reveal a concert ticket from July 2004. My very first rock concert. I don't know why, but I suddenly felt an intense craving for acacia honey. I put the ticket back where I'd

found it and threw the bag across my shoulder.

'You alone?' I asked Sarah when I popped my head into the kitchen. She was packing food into a plastic container – her dinner for later I guessed.

'Yes, Will's still at work, and Joe is over at Mrs Hardy's. I've still got time to make us a quick cuppa if you want one,' she replied.

I nodded, and she put the kettle on. Again, I felt like a guest in my own home.

'I'm surprised she's still alive. She must be over a hundred now,' I said.

'Yes, she's still going but quite frail now. She needs a live-in carer, but you know what she's like – too proud to get one or to move into a care home. So she keeps getting Joe to do things for her around the house.'

Perhaps my father wasn't that useless after all.

'You seem a bit down. Is everything okay?' she asked, handing me a mug.

I shrugged and sipped me tea. I didn't want to talk about it at first, but she had a way of getting people to open up to her.

'Jules' boyfriend is playing with his band in a club tomorrow – it's their first public performance, but I'm meant to be working and haven't been able to get anyone to cover my shift.'

'That's too bad.'

'I don't know what to do – I promised Jules I'd be there.'

'I see. Well, I'm sure you'll figure something out,' she said with an encouraging smile.

'How's work going for you?' I asked, trying to change the subject.

'Same old, same old. More patients, less staff, budget cuts and so on…'

I shouldn't have asked; the giant grey bags under her eyes should have spoken for her. She must have been doing a lot of overtime.

'It's flu season, isn't it? I keep forgetting how busy winter can get for you,' I said.

'It's that and the other usual bugs going around as well.'

'Like what?'

'Norovirus, you know – stomach bugs. Some are really nasty, but they don't last long, luckily. Of course, you're not supposed to go to work or school for forty-eight hours, even when the symptoms have gone,' she said, sipping her tea. She fixed her big grey eyes on me until she was satisfied I'd got the message. 'Did your friend not want to come in too? It's drizzling outside.'

'No, he'll be alright. I'm leaving now anyway,' I said quickly, finishing the tea and putting the empty mug into the sink.

'Just leave it; I'll wash it up later.'

'Bye,' I said, looking back at her from the kitchen door, 'and thanks… for everything.'

She nodded and smiled.

CHAPTER 12
TRANSPORTED

Jules and I were supposed to meet Steve at the club. His band had to get there an hour early to check in with the manager and set up the equipment. On the way to Brixton, Jules told me that Steve had booked them into a luxurious spa hotel somewhere on the coast – Eastbourne or Hastings. He hadn't splashed out on extravagant trips before, and she was quite excited.

'You're thinking again,' she said as we walked from the station to the club.

I looked down and saw she was right. I was twisting the imaginary ring on my finger again.

'It's nothing.'

'Are you nervous about the exam results?'

I shrugged; she knew me too well. Also, it still bothered me that I'd lied to Ted when calling in sick this morning. I hoped I wouldn't come across anyone from work tonight who would tell my boss that I wasn't frequenting the toilet at home. And I hoped Matty wasn't the type to betray a (work) friend, but I was worried that Phil and Paula might say something about how I'd tried to swap shifts with them.

'You'll be fine. You always get top marks. I don't understand why you're so worried.'

As we were about to enter the club, I saw Nicholas loitering twenty yards behind us. I told Jules to hang on for a second and walked up to him. We didn't even say 'hi', and instead of telling him off for breaking rule number three, I just grabbed

his hand, which almost automatically reached for mine, and pulled him towards the club entrance.

'Jules, this is Nicholas.'

'Hey, you look familiar,' said Jules. 'Where do I know you from?'

Biting my lips, I tried to think of a good lie in case she recognised him as my unconscious stalker, though she'd had to rush off to work straight after calling 999.

'I've been everywhere with Elizabeth,' said Nicholas.

Jules watched his face suspiciously then slapped her forehead.

'University, that's it. You're a student too, aren't you? I think I saw you in the library a few times. What do you study?'

'My speciality is languages…'

'That's nice.'

'Hello, ladies!' Steve said, coming out of the club. 'Hey, mate, how's it going?' he asked, offering his hand to Nicholas, who awkwardly but firmly shook it.

'Not much to report,' Nicholas replied.

I introduced the boys to each other. 'Steve's band, Whispering Waters, is playing tonight,' I explained to Nicholas enthusiastically.

'It's Whistling Woods, but hey, that's not a bad name either,' Steve said, and I blushed at my mistake.

'So you're a friend of Liz's,' he said with a playful smile, eyeing Nicholas. 'Well, she's a good girl, so don't want anything bad to happen to her if you catch my drift,' he added, crossing his arms, which made his muscles bulge under his white short-sleeve top, drawing attention to his tattoos.

'No, that's not something I'd want either,' Nicholas agreed calmly.

'Good – glad we understand each other,' Steve said, rubbing his hands together. 'Why don't we go in? After you, ladies.'

It was pretty dark inside, and the stage was currently occupied by a black girl sitting on a high stool singing some deeply sad lyrics about lost love with beautiful low vocals to the

melancholic tune provided by the guitarist beside her. She had very thick hair, and when she occasionally turned towards the guitarist, it looked like she was kissing him.

I'd expected the air to be stuffy, but a pleasant cinnamon scent was floating around, similar to the smell of the incense sticks Jules sometimes burned in the flat.

We sat down around a tall table, and Steve bought us some drinks.

'Cheers, everyone!' he said, and we clinked our glasses. Nicholas lifted his Guinness slightly, too, so that Steve could clink the necks of their bottles together, but Nicholas didn't take a sip.

'So, mate, what is it you do?' Steve asked.

'Nicholas is in the security business,' I said before he could reply. I knew Steve appreciated like-minded men who were practical and hands-on, and my quick thinking surprised even me. Then, to dismiss Jules' confusion, I quickly added, 'Part-time.'

'Like burglar alarms and CCTV?' Steve asked, and I could tell my lie had triggered his interest. 'A mate of mine does the same – quite a good little business. They do maintenance for bigger companies in the city, like banks and offices. You're in a similar line?'

I put a firm hand on Nicholas's leg under the table to stop him from saying something, but he'd already opened his mouth.

'I provide a more personal service for… individuals,' he said.

When he'd finished the sentence, I relaxed in my seat. Then I saw a man standing at the side of the stage, who I thought to be the club manager, pointing at his watch and trying to catch Steve's attention.

'Better go,' said Steve, drinking up the last of his Guinness. 'See you guys in a bit.'

A few minutes later, the stage went dark, and when the lights came on again, it was Steve, behind a set of drums, and

three of his friends, holding a saxophone, a trumpet, and a guitar. When the saxophone sounded, the whole audience fell silent. Then the drums slowly joined in, followed by the other two instruments. The music transported me to a place where love seemed to be the most painful emotion. And in my head, the blurry image of a boy behind a driving wheel appeared. I couldn't see the shape of his eyes clearly, but the irises were a beautiful shade of hazel…

*

Only when the music had died down, and Steve's band was getting loud applause and whistles, did I notice I was still grasping Nicholas's thigh. I quickly withdrew my hand, and he looked at me with a strange expression – concern mixed with something else. The music had really moved me; my eyes were tearing up, but I had no reason to cry.

When Nicholas had left for the loo, Jules said to me, 'I like him.'

'Who?'

'Nicholas.'

'You've barely spoken to him!'

'He has a certain aura about him that I find calming… Anyway, what's going on with you two? I thought you were seeing Victor – or are you seeing both? Go, girl, you've finally learned to play the game! First Victor, then Henry, and now Nicholas. It's not even a love triangle but a love quadrangle.'

'Nicholas is just a friend, and I don't know any Henry.'

She smirked at my response.

'Can we talk about something else?' I asked, and a minute later, Nicholas returned, and Jules and I both went quiet.

After leaving the jazz club, Jules and Steve headed for a celebratory dinner, but I'd excused myself and Nicholas. I didn't want the evening to turn awkward should Nicholas slip up about his imaginary supernatural state or flip out at Steve for something. I couldn't bear the thought of them getting into a

fight that would likely have left Nicholas (or Luke) in another coma. Also, I didn't want to give Jules any more reason to think it was a secret double date.

It was a cold evening, but I had my thick duffle coat on. Wearing a sheepskin aviator jacket, Nicholas also seemed to be okay with the chilly air as long as we were on the move. So instead of taking the Tube, we started walking back to the flat. It was about a five or six miles on foot, which I thought would take us an hour and a half, but it was only eight o'clock. On the way back, I kept replaying the conversation between Steve and Nicholas in my head.

'You know, you could have made up something about your job when Steve asked you. I'm not saying you didn't handle it right; it was actually quite clever how you put it.' As soon as I said it, I became anxious about whether he'd take it as a criticism or a compliment. This evening had been going so well; I didn't want it to end in a fight.

'I can't lie.' His face remained emotionless. *Relief.*

'I'm not good at it either.'

'No, you don't understand,' he said. 'I'm not allowed to lie.'

Here we go again. After having a pleasant evening out together, he just had to ruin it.

'Why not?' I asked, just to be polite.

'It's punishable.'

'What do you mean?'

He shrugged.

'Come on – how does God punish you for lying?'

'It's more like a reminder. This body experiences a small electric shock.'

'Ouch. What a gentle reminder!' Perhaps he did experience tremors or something similar when not telling the truth, not courtesy of God but down to his own subconscious mind.

He made no further comment, and our conversation halted until we got to Clapham high street.

As we walked on, I saw a church. There was something about it that drew me closer. I hadn't been to church for over

a decade, and it wasn't even an Anglican one but Methodist. Then my hunger overtook the feeling of familiarity. Although I needed something savoury to fill my stomach, I craved acacia honey – I kept a couple of jars at home.

I looked at Nicholas, who'd stopped a few yards back. His face bore the same strange expression as it had at the club. I realised he was watching me with an air of expectancy.

'I'm starving,' I said.

'Why didn't you go with your friends then?'

'Are you hungry?'

'I could eat.'

This was the first time he'd admitted to hunger since I'd met him, and I made a mental note of this historical moment.

'There's a kebab place just there.' I pointed at the large red electric sign on a shopfront across the road.

We ordered two lamb kebabs with everything and settled at a nearby bus stop to eat our food on the plastic bench. I'd always just passed through Clapham and had had no reason to stop here. Yet somehow I knew all the bus numbers calling there and all the routes listed on the boards around us without looking at them. And there was that familiar church too. *I must have been here before – but when?*

'You're shivering. Why don't we take the bus back?' he asked just as one was slowing down to call at the stop we'd turned into an impromptu dining area.

'Fine.'

Every time I saw Nicholas take out his blue travel pass, I couldn't help smiling. *A (self-appointed) guardian angel with an Oyster card.*

I glanced back as we took a seat on the upper deck. I thought I'd seen a chihuahua on the shoulder of a lady wearing a green scarf, sitting a few rows before us. However, when I looked at her again, the animal wasn't there. It seemed it wasn't just Nicholas whose subconscious mind had been playing tricks.

Is this a sign I'm going mad? Have I been spending too much time with him?

CHAPTER 13

EMBEDDED

Matty recommended Shepherd's Bush Market to me on Friday, my first day back at work following my fake illness, and I decided I'd give it a try. It appeared no one had told my boss about my attempts to get someone to cover for me on Wednesday. Ted's genuine concern made me feel even more ashamed about lying. On my shift, I saw Paula too. Although she was friendly, she didn't inquire about my welfare, seemingly oblivious to the fact that I'd missed a day at work.

After wandering the market for about half an hour on Saturday morning with Nicholas, my treasure hunt paid off. I found the perfect birthday present for Will: a first edition of a Scooby Doo comic book. I was sure he'd get the joke, and being a comic book enthusiast, he'd appreciate the rarity of my find. Overwhelmed with excitement, I decided to go to Dad's, wrap it there, and give it to Will straight away, though he was only turning twenty-six the following Tuesday.

When I heard the high-pitched scream of a little boy, I'd just got off the bus; Nicholas had stayed behind to let others off first. The sound chilled me to the bone. I sprinted towards the crying child, and only when I got within a couple of yards of him did I recognise the boy as Tommy Williams, the neighbours' son from across the road – the same boy I'd seen some weeks back at the supermarket with his mother and his younger sisters. He was curled up on the muddy ground near Dad's house, his left leg was bleeding, and his whole body was shaking with fear and shock. A black dog with pointed ears was standing over him.

Before the animal noticed me, I went to force out a loose picket from the old, weathered fence my father had never got around to fixing. But before I could get it out, the dog turned its head, snarling at me.

Nicholas finally caught up with me, and as soon as he appeared, the animal lay down, its head resting on its forelegs, its tail wagging.

'Are you okay?' he asked.

I nodded slowly, trying to process what I'd seen.

'The boy needs to get to the hospital,' I said, waking up from my daze. I settled next to Tommy; he was still in the same position, trembling. 'It's going to be okay,' I told him then placed a call to 999.

Just as I hung up the phone, I saw Dad coming out of Mrs Hardy's and waved him over. He quickly assessed the situation then rushed inside to grab some towels, which he used to cover Tommy's wound in an attempt to stop the bleeding.

My father must have been in a lot of pain himself with his leg, yet he was running around to make the little boy as comfortable as possible. Having worked as a firefighter for over a decade, he was used to seeing the injured, unlike me, but I didn't want to leave Tommy's side, so I asked Dad to let the boy's mother know what had happened.

Less than a minute later, Mrs Williams came running and took my place next to her son. She said my father had offered to stay at her house and look after her two little girls until she got back from the hospital.

We didn't need to wait long for the ambulance and animal control. Both appeared within ten minutes of my reporting the incident, though it felt like we'd been waiting forever.

Nicholas had kept the dog under control until it was taken away. The two uniformed men from animal services exchanged perplexed looks that this quiet and calm dog had been the one to cause harm to a small child.

Once both vans left, I invited Nicholas into the kitchen for tea. Sarah and Will weren't home.

'You were great at comforting the child. I've never seen you that calm,' he said when I passed him a mug.

It was the first compliment I'd heard from him.

'I wasn't, but it didn't seem like the right time to fall apart,' I said, realising it had all happened so quickly that the shock was only just starting to reach me now, making me more upset by the second. 'He needed someone to hold his hand, and you were busy. How did you do that, by the way?'

'Do what?'

'Tame the dog?'

'You still don't believe me, do you?'

'This is crazy. You seriously believe you're an angel, don't you?'

'It's not a question of what I believe. I know what I am. And you saw what happened. Is that not proof enough for you?'

'What I saw could have been a magic trick,' I said. 'It's obvious you're good at controlling animals. You might have worked at a kennel – how would I know?' I shrugged and added, 'So it doesn't prove anything.'

Despite what I'd told him, I was still baffled – just like the men from animal services when they'd collected the dog.

Nicholas leaned over the table, gently took the mug out of my hands, put it down, then wrapped my hands in both of his.

'What are you doing?' I asked.

'I know you can feel it.'

I wished I hadn't asked, because there was no logical explanation for what was happening, but he was right – I did feel it. The moment he touched my skin, I stopped being shaken by what had happened. I only felt warmth spreading from my hands, through my core, all the way down to my toes.

'Ouch,' I said, and he turned my palms upwards.

'A splinter, right there.'

I followed his gaze; however, what I saw was a shard of glass embedded in the side of my right palm, blood oozing from the wound. I blinked and the image was gone. I pulled my hands away.

'It's fine. I'll get it out later,' I said.

'What happens to the dog now?'

'I expect it'll be put down.'

He pressed his lips together and got up, pacing the kitchen from one end to another.

'What's got you so angry this time?' I asked.

'The dog hurt that little boy, and he'd have killed him too… and it was about to attack you too. Argh! This is just so typical of humans – again,' he cried in frustration. 'Treating the symptoms instead of dealing with the root of the illness.'

'What are you talking about?'

'That animal wasn't born evil. Someone turned him,' he said, almost shouting.

'If it's any consolation, the owner will be punished too. They'll get a fine or may even be imprisoned for a few months.'

'*A few months*? Is that all? While the animal is being put down?' He was shaking his head and let out a burst of hysterical laughter.

'I know it doesn't seem fair, but I don't set the rules.'

'Let me put it this way: who's the real murderer – the one who carries out the act, or the one who sets it all in motion?'

'I've just said I do get what you're saying, and to some extent, I agree with you, but would you rather that dog was set free, and then tomorrow it attacks another child, and perhaps this time it actually kills?' I asked, convinced I was making a valid point. 'A shark will always be a shark.'

'A shark is born a predator. Like I said, that dog was turned into one. It's not like it was given a choice.'

'But it doesn't matter anymore, does it? You can't change a predator back into a lamb. That's not how the world works. Murderers don't suddenly become Mother Teresa – *not ever*, for that matter. Carnivorous animals don't become vegetarian. And dogs trained to kill don't forget the thrill of the attack. You can't keep natural instincts suppressed forever.'

'Then enlighten me please. How does your world work? Who sets the rules? Who decides what's fair and what punishment one deserves?'

I shrugged. 'I don't know. I guess it's down to the society we live in. I'm sorry if that's not what you want to hear, but the truth is without rules, there would be chaos.'

He looked at me with disgust.

'And He sent and sacrificed His only son for *you*,' he said, his voice still full of anger and disbelief.

'What do you want from me? To start and fight the system that's existed for God knows how long – thousands of years?' I asked, realising I probably should have worded it without using God's name as his eyes flickered. 'I've got news for you: what you or I think doesn't matter. We're both just sand grains in the wind. You have your orders, and I have mine – I mean rules to live by.' My throat hurt, and I realised I'd been raising my voice and had risen from my seat. I lowered myself back onto the chair, grabbed my mug, and gulped down my tea, which was now nearly cold.

Minutes passed in silence, and I was positive I felt almost as angry as he was. Sod's law that when I needed his soothing touch, he was the reason for my upset state.

'I'm sorry,' he said quietly but didn't sit down.

'You protected me today from that dog, and thank you for that, but why do you always have to provoke an argument with me that ends in such a drama?' I asked, trying to calm my voice. 'It's like when you're unhappy about something, the whole world must know.'

'That's not true.'

'Really? Our conversations – don't they always end like this? In an argument?'

'It's not the whole world. I only ever have these conversations with you.'

'Well, thanks for the privilege,' I said mockingly. 'Perhaps you could consider widening your circle of friends.'

'You consider me a friend?' he asked in a warmer tone, sounding surprised, and I thought perhaps he did have a split personality. It made me feel sorry for him again.

'I see you every day, and today you've saved my life, and we're now having tea. I can't call you my enemy or a complete

stranger anymore, can I?' I sighed, giving up. 'Are you going to finish your tea? I have to get back to Putney. I've got work this afternoon.'

'I know.'

'Of course you do. You know my entire weekly schedule, right?' I asked, and the sarcasm in my voice was unmistakable, but he nodded.

'Seriously? All of it? Let's hear it then.'

He then recited my entire schedule for the week – my university timetable, work rota, and all my other regular activities.

'I don't know which one is sadder: how predictable my life sounds or that you know all this about me,' I sighed. 'How come you know everything about me?'

'Comes with the job.'

After following me around for almost two months, I supposed it made sense that he knew most of my schedule, but it didn't explain how he knew about my monthly cinema visits. I'd been going each month before December – when I'd been too busy and skipped it – but just because we'd watched a film together this month didn't mean I did that regularly. Was he guessing, or had he been watching me longer than I thought? No, he couldn't have been stalking me prior to early December; he'd been in a coma for almost three months. It didn't make sense. Perhaps his mother was in on it too, though I had trouble imagining the all-smiles Mrs O'Shea wandering around London after me, like a spy… Or maybe someone else I didn't know about had been stalking me. Weighing the options, I couldn't decide whether to be impressed or freaked out, so all I said to him was, 'Drink up and let's go.'

CHAPTER 14

RE/COLLECTION

The dream still lingered in my head, and so did the name. However, this time, it wasn't just a first name. Henry Abbott – I heard myself whispering it as my eyes opened. And there was finally a clear face to go with the name: it was oval shaped with short dark-blond curly hair, a long turned-up nose, and a pair of close-set hazel eyes.

I knew I'd seen him before, but I couldn't recall when or where. I tried to look up the name on the internet, but there were way too many results, so I decided to get my art pad out; I hoped that putting the image on paper meant the stranger would stop haunting my dreams.

'I didn't know you could draw like that,' said Steve. He was sitting next to me on the sofa watching football. 'Hey, Jules, come here. Look at what Lizzie's drawn.'

Jules appeared from the kitchen, whipping something in a bowl, and leaned over to examine the pad on my lap.

'Yeah, she's always been pretty good,' Jules said. 'I've always told her that she should become an artist.'

'A struggling one?' I asked, looking up at her. 'No thanks. Today, there's a painter and singer at every corner. Too much talent but not enough audience and money to go around.'

For a second, I thought I may have hurt Steve's feelings, but he didn't seem to have taken my comment to heart.

'Good-looking chap – who is he?' asked Steve.

'I don't know, but he looks familiar,' I replied.

'It's like that Adam Sandler movie where Drew Barrymore

keeps drawing his picture. Except you haven't got amnesia, have you?' asked Steve.

I guessed Jules had made him watch it – I didn't think he'd choose a romantic comedy of his own volition.

'Nope, not that I know of,' I said, vaguely recalling the scene and wondering when I'd seen that film.

'Shoot, look at the time. I'm off to work now,' he said, jumping up from the sofa.

'Bye, Steve,' said Jules

'Bye, babe.'

'I told you not to call me that.'

'Fine, *honey*…' he said.

Before leaving the living room, he turned back to Jules and said, 'I'll be back. *Hasta la vista*, baby.'

'He's such a big man-child. He sometimes does get on my nerves.'

'But you love him,' I pointed out.

'Yes, I do,' she sighed. 'So you seriously don't mind him living here?'

'No, I love having him around. He's very handy. He fixed that tap, the cupboard door – made the washing machine less noisy. Oh, and he sorted out the Jehovah's Witnesses.'

'What do you mean he's sorted them out?' she asked, eyeing me suspiciously.

'They're unlikely to come back…'

'Liz!' she cried.

'Okay,' I sighed. 'So they came here the other day, and Steve answered the door, and he just happened to have a big knife in his hand.' I kept quiet about how he'd looked out the window and seen them entering the building. 'And he told them to hang on while he finished off the virgin. Anyway, they seemed pretty taken aback by it.'

The whole truth was that Steve and I had watched them running out of the building. I'd also conveniently withheld my contribution to driving them away: convincingly pleading for my life while watching TV and eating popcorn in the lounge. The

Jehovah's Witnesses couldn't see me from where they'd been standing, but I was sure they could hear me. Once they'd disappeared, we'd high-fived each other – it was the best bonding experience.

'Oh God! I need to talk to Steve – he can't walk around with a knife! If he keeps doing things like that, we'll be kicked out of this flat.'

'You mean your brothers would kick us out for that?'

'I'm talking about the neighbours! What if someone sees Steve and reports us to the police? For endangering the public or something. Sure, that would go down well with the council, and I don't know what it would do to the twins' lease agreement – they've been subletting without approval.'

I hadn't thought about that. In hindsight, perhaps we'd gone too far.

'What's that?' she asked, putting down the bowl and picking up a narrow box from the bistro table.

I really needed to stop leaving things on the table if I wanted to avoid her interrogating and lecturing me in the future.

'The spa voucher we got for Paula,' I said meekly.

'When are you planning on giving it to her?'

'That's the thing. We were supposed to celebrate her birthday today. I got her a cake and a card too, but before I could give it to her, we had a crackdown in the locker room – everyone's locker got searched, and she got fired on the spot. It turns out she'd been stealing some stuff. I know she's a single mum – and she has to watch the pennies and all – but it wasn't even like basic stuff that you can't live without. She'd been stocking up on perfumes, luxury hand creams, and toiletry gift packs.'

'Maybe she was selling it – you never know.'

'Maybe… but it explains why she always smelled so good and had such beautiful hair and skin.'

'It just shows how much effort you put into everything you do for others and that you always buy the right gift for everyone,' she said. 'I'm sure she'd have loved the spa day if she was nicking skincare products. So what are you going to do with that voucher now?'

'I'll take it back and get a refund. I'll need to give back everyone's money.'

'Unless…' she said, narrowing her eyes.

'What?'

'Unless you keep it and use it yourself.'

'What are you talking about?' I asked, appalled. 'I can't do that. It's like stealing. I don't want to be like Paula.'

'Come on – I'll pay for it. You got me a spa day for my birthday; you can have this as an early birthday present for yours. You deserve some relaxing "me time" more than anyone I know.'

'It's for two – I thought she could take a friend…'

'Well, it would be rude of me not to tag along,' she said, batting her eyelashes and fanning herself with the voucher. 'After all, I, too, deserve a spa day for being such a good friend and taking care of you so well.'

I laughed. 'If you say so,' I replied, wondering whether she'd read the small print on the front of the box before trying to convince me to keep the voucher.

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I looked down from the window and saw a bright red Ferrari pull up in the street. As I was ready and had been for the past ten minutes, I was eager to leave the flat and decided I'd spare Victor climbing three flights of stairs.

When I got outside, I heard a voice say, 'I'm not here to stop you.'

'Ha ha. As if you could anyway,' Victor replied.

'Hey, what's going on here?' I asked, realising he was talking to Nicholas.

'Your friend here was just saying that he's not going to stop me from having a great time with my beautiful lady – is that not so?' Victor flashed a smile at Nicholas.

Nicholas didn't reply, but as I passed him, he caught my arm.

'Elizabeth…' he said.

'Yes?' I asked. I wasn't sure why, but for a second, I thought he was going to try to say something to stop me from getting into the car, and I wondered if he might succeed.

'Lizzie, darling, are you coming?' asked Victor, having opened the passenger door for me.

I looked back at Nicholas, and he lowered his head, releasing my arm.

Unsurprisingly, I'd never sat in a Ferrari before, and words failed me as soon as I sank into the soft beige seat. On the dashboard, the sheer number of buttons immediately overwhelmed me. I'd always thought Steve's old sports car was cool, but it was nothing compared to Victor's. I put the seat belt on, but I was afraid to touch anything else in case I broke it; I'd never be able to pay for the repairs.

'Where are we going?' I asked. I'd asked him already when agreeing to the date, and he'd said there would be dinner but wouldn't give me specifics about the destination over the phone. I'd opted for the black dress he'd bought me with the black shoes, as the combination seemed appropriate for a fancy dinner anywhere. Victor was wearing a dark suit without a tie, the top button of his shirt undone, so my decision seemed right.

'Somewhere with a view,' he said.

'What view?'

'Let's not ruin the surprise.'

I could only think of one place with amazing views of the city that would suit Victor's tastes, although I'd never been there. But I was wrong again – he wasn't taking me to the Shard. We pulled up in a car park near Hyde Park.

'Where are you taking me?' I asked as we started walking towards the park entrance.

'I told you: somewhere with a view.'

'I thought… Never mind.'

He laughed. 'Patience. We're almost there.'

'But we're heading towards Kensington Gardens.'

Again, I was mistaken. Our destination wasn't Kensington Gardens but the art gallery in the park. The two-storey building had brick walls and countless glass doors or floor-to-ceiling Georgian glazed windows. It extended out on the ground floor as if the architect had changed their mind halfway through the build and had decided to add extra floor space around a square-shaped house. What seemed to start as a mansard roof, with tiled slopes on all four sides, ended up topped with a little white tower that reminded me of a miniature lighthouse. I liked the style of the building; I'd been here once, a couple of years ago. I knew they had a cafe that served lunch, but I didn't think that would still be open.

'Welcome, Señor De Cabra, to the Serpentine! It's so nice of you to visit our humble gallery again!' said a petite middle-aged woman as we entered.

Her extremely straight posture made her look not just severe but also taller, making me feel like the hunchback of Notre-Dame in comparison, so I quickly straightened myself up, pushing out my breasts, and now I was looking down at her. Her light brown hair had some grey in it and was pinned to the back of her head in a neat bun. She could have been a 3D illustration of efficiency and elegance. For a second, I thought I saw a strand of hair threatening to come free, but when I looked at her again, the bun was still perfect.

'Thank you, Irina, it's always a pleasure,' said Victor.

'We're so grateful for your last donation; it was very generous indeed!'

'Don't even mention it. I can see already it's been put to good use.'

The lady smiled and flashed her brilliant white teeth.

'Let me see – it says here that you've requested a private tour of the latest collection. Have I got that right?'

'Only if it's not too much trouble…'

'No, of course not,' she said quickly. 'Just wanted to double-check. I've arranged for our best guide to be here tonight and take you through the exhibition. And your dinner will be

served at eight o'clock.' She took another look at her notes before smiling at us again. 'Very well then. I hope both you and your guest will find the tour informative, and that you'll enjoy your time with us.'

'I have no doubt about that. Thank you, Irina.'

As if by magic, an attractive young black woman, very official looking in a tailored light grey suit with a white shirt, appeared next to Irina.

She gave us a smile and introduced herself as 'Josie', our guide for the night – though according to her name tag, her full name was Josephine. The white letters were printed on a black background, but the letters turned hot pink, the background brightening up when the light hit it, before darkening once more.

'So what you see here is our newest exhibition, titled Erotic Surrealism, aka Eros,' she said as she led us through a couple of double doors.

'To understand Erotic Surrealism, we need to talk about Surrealism first. This art movement began around the 1920s, and the word "surrealism" means beyond realism, as the artists of the era were trying to merge rational vision with dreams or images of the subconscious mind in an unprecedented, unconventional way to depict some kind of "super-reality" and, through its strange beauty and magic, revolutionise the viewer's experience. In the first room, we do have some great examples of Surrealism on display too.'

I was very familiar with Surrealism but listened intently in case she said something I didn't already know. However, whenever she said 'erotic', my cheeks started burning.

There was one thing, though, that I disagreed with Josie about, but I hadn't voiced it: I would have said that Surrealist artists had partly been inspired by nightmares rather than dreams. And I wondered whether it would be easy for someone like Nicholas, who was already removed from reality, to create a Surrealist painting.

Josie went on to talk about Surrealism for another five minutes before touching on its erotic branch again.

As we walked further into the gallery, the art pieces around us made my cheeks burn even more; some (depicting dismembered and disfigured women) even turned my stomach to the point I wasn't sure I'd be able to eat anything after her presentation. The terror and fear expressed in the pictures slowly started to creep into my mind too; however, Victor seemed to be in his element, studying each picture with great interest and nodding approvingly at them, even the ones I found most disturbing.

'I hope you enjoyed the tour,' said Josie and looked at her watch, 'and if we walk back to our starting point, I believe you'll find your table is ready for dinner to be served.'

As I followed them back, I saw a painting I hadn't noticed at the start of the tour. It was Dalí's 'Ballerina in a Death's Head' depicting a skull that could also be viewed as a dancer. I was surprised to see it, as it had nothing to do with erotica, but then I recalled Josie had mentioned the exhibition included some traditional Surrealist images too.

I stepped closer to examine the artwork, and the skull's teeth, which also formed the dancer's tutu, took on a bright peach colour in the light.

'Let's eat,' said Victor, grabbing my hand and dragging me away.

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After dinner, we walked back to his car. He put his hand on my thigh as he drove, and I felt tingly and warm, my mind playing out hundreds of scenarios of what might happen when we got back to my place – all of which ended with us kissing and more…

My prediction proved correct – Victor did kiss me when we got to the flat. His skin was smooth and soft, and his tongue felt hot when it slid through my lips. He then started to spoil my neck with delicate kisses, raising my chin to start from under my jaw. I tried to suppress my low moans, biting my lips.

At the same time, his right hand wandered down to my cleavage, shamelessly pushed towards him, inviting his soft fingers in.

Cupping one breast, his index finger circled around my nipple, hidden by black lace, until I moaned in his ear, and he pressed his soft, full lips on mine again. Then he slid his hand across onto the other breast, toying with the nipple until my whole body tensed.

My hands were wrinkling his immaculately pressed white shirt, his skin burning through the expensive material – and I felt like I was burning with him. I inhaled his masculine scent; the strong, spicy, aromatic cologne clouded my vision.

My restless fingers slowly moved over his hard abdomen, down to the waistline of his perfectly fitted trousers. When his tongue retreated for a second, I sighed, finding the zip about to burst open without my intervention. The idea of seeing him naked sent a chill through my spine, making my knees weak.

I wanted him to continue kissing me; I wanted him to have me, yet instead of offering him my bedroom for the night, I pushed him away.

'I'm sorry,' I said. 'I just can't…'

He was looking at me with a strange expression. It wasn't anger and it wasn't lust – it was more intense than that. As if he was about to hurt me for wounding his pride. But it only lasted a second, and I thought I must have imagined it.

'You don't know what you're missing out on,' he said coolly, but I was positive I did.

I scolded my hands for not acting on my brain's command. I still wanted to grab him and take all his clothes off so I could finally admire his sun-kissed body.

'I'm sorry,' I repeated. 'It's just I'm under so much pressure with work and university I think my mind just can't switch off.'

I was surprised to hear my own voice saying this without faltering. I'd never been good at reacting on the spot, yet here I was, making up almost valid excuses for bailing out on what might have been the hottest sex of my life.

'Just let me know when the time is right. I'll be around,' he said.

I still didn't understand what he saw in me, and I now started to think perhaps I wasn't the only one he'd been seeing

if he could so easily let it go. Perhaps there was a queue of girls (likely taller and bustier than me) waiting for his phone call, ready to throw themselves into his arms, on his bed or wherever he wanted to take them. He was a man after all.

I thought of Nicholas and his outbursts and wondered if he had similar urges. But of course, he must do – he was a man, despite his unwavering belief that he was a biblical creature with or without wings.

I started to get hot again down there and wished I hadn't ruined my chances of a fun night with Victor – then a vision filled my head, and shockingly, it wasn't Victor rolling on a bed with me but Nicholas.

I put the strange image down to my previous train of thought invading my subconscious. Of course it was Victor I should be picturing pulling down the zip of my tight dress, sliding it off my naked body, kissing my hungry lips and the sensitive skin on my breasts – not a delusional person who kept wasting his time stalking me, and with whom every conversation ended up in a fight.

CHAPTER 15
TOUCHED

'Jules, are you ready?' I called, packing my swimwear into my shoulder bag. 'We need to leave now if we don't want to be late.'

A low groan sounded from her room, and I rushed in only to find she was still lying in bed, crumpled-up tissues scattered on the floor all around her. Her forehead was bathed in sweat, her cheeks were flushed, and she had large dark circles under her eyes. She was visibly shivering and pulling the duvet tightly around herself.

'Oh, poor you. Have you had any sleep at all? You look awful.'

'I think I've got the flu. My whole body aches, and I can't get up.'

'What do you need me to do? Shall I bring you another blanket, or do you want a hot tea or juice? Shall I make you some soup later?'

'Liz, calm down. It's fine. I'm not hungry at all, and I've taken ibuprofen already. Steve made me a big thermos of herbal tea before going to work, and he said he'd drop by on his lunch break with some food. Sorry, but you'll have to go to the spa without me.'

As she spoke, I saw the bottle and the pack of medicine on her bedside cabinet.

'It's okay. I'm not going to leave you on your own. I'll stay here. Besides, I don't fancy going alone.'

'Don't be silly. Go and enjoy. You deserve a break for smashing those exams.'

'I can try and call the spa to rearrange the booking.'

'Liz, just go. You'll just catch my virus if you stay here,' she said. Then after a sneeze, she added, 'If you don't want to go alone, why don't you take Victor?'

'He's out of town, again,' I said – and I was sure Victor was used to a whole different level of spa experience, not one that would cost seventy pounds for two for half a day.

'What about Blondie?'

'I'm not taking him for a spa day.'

'Why not? You brought him to Steve's concert,' she said, blowing her nose. 'Seriously, is there anything you're not telling me? I saw you two the other day walking back from the supermarket.'

'We're not dating. He's just… a friend. He's got some issues at home, and I let him hang out here sometimes.'

She smirked. 'Yeah, sure. The voucher is for two though, so you might as well take him. I know how much you hate wasting money.'

'I'll have a think about it.'

'Well, don't think too long because you'll be late.'

'Look who's talking. You're always late for everything.'

'Sweetie pie, I'm never late. I just like to make a dramatic and memorable entrance – there's a difference.'

'If you say so,' I said sceptically. 'Fine, I'll go. Send me a message if you need me to pick up anything on the way home. I should be back by three at the latest. I'll turn up the heating for you before I leave.'

'Thanks. And, Liz, stop being so stubborn. Just take him.'

Unfortunately, Jules was right: I hated things going to waste, so I decided that if Nicholas was loitering outside the building, I'd take him – but if not, I'd just go on my own. I hoped he wouldn't be there, but where else would he be?

'Hurry up – we're late,' I said by way of greeting.

'Late for what?'

'You'll see. You're not wearing Speedos under your jeans by any chance?' I asked, and he grimaced. 'No, right, I didn't think so. We'll make a quick stop at the shop on the way.'

When we got to the supermarket, I dragged him to the menswear section.

'Which one?' I asked, holding up two pairs of swim shorts.

'What are those for? Are we going swimming?'

'Something like that, but don't worry, it's not a problem if you can't swim. Just pick one. Navy or bottle green?'

He cast an uninterested look at the shorts.

'Navy it is then; goes better with your eyes,' I said, putting the other one back on the rack.

'If you'd told me sooner, I could have brought Luke's swim shorts.'

'Never mind. Let's just pay for this. We need to rush; we're going to be late.'

Luckily, the store was quiet in the early hours, and there were no queues at the checkout. The only till open was manned by Matty. He greeted us politely, acting as if he didn't know me, and gave me a wink and a smile. My face turned red.

'He's not my boyfriend,' I mouthed, but Matty carried on smirking. At least he didn't forget to apply my employee discount.

'Cash or card, sir?'

'Card,' I said, but Nicholas had already handed a banknote to Matty.

Nicholas still hadn't told me where he'd been getting money from, but I hadn't had time to ponder the question. The one thing I knew for sure was that he couldn't be holding a steady job if he spent all his time following me around.

'Thanks, Matty. See you tomorrow.'

I grabbed Nicholas's hand to avoid losing him in the busy street while we ran for the bus – not that there was any chance of getting rid of him for long anyway.

'Just two stops,' I said as I dragged him to the back of the bus.

When we got to the spa, Nicholas almost ran off. And he looked rather uncomfortable when he emerged from the changing room in a bathrobe.

'So what now?' he asked, tying the belt tight around his waist.

'Please stop looking so miserable – don't make me regret bringing you along.'

He squeezed his lips tighter in response.

'Seriously, you spoil everything. Just try to relax. Take a long breath in through the nose. Do it. Then exhale through the mouth. Come on – just do it with me,' I instructed, recalling what I'd learned at yoga, and he finally gave in, repeating the breathing exercise with me. 'Any better?'

'No.'

'Good. Now, let's go find the pool and the saunas.'

I removed my bathrobe and hung it on the nearest hook with my towel.

'Come on – you too. Take off your bathrobe.'

He did as I'd asked. I'd expected to see bony legs and an undefined torso with every rib visible. However, his body showed some beginnings of healthy muscle development, though he was still on the skinny side. Now I thought about it, his face had filled out a bit since I'd first met him, and the prominent nose that had dominated his face now blended in nicely with the rest of his features. He seemed to have listened to me and must have been frequently visiting the university cafeteria and the gym while I'd been attending lectures.

'You're staring at me,' he said.

'Now you know how it feels.'

'It doesn't make me feel anything. You know that—'

'Shh,' I said, placing my index finger on his mouth, 'it's meant to be a quiet place. Don't say whatever you were about to say. You'll just get us both taken away and locked up. Remember rule number five… Now let's take a shower first, then we can try out the different heat rooms.'

As we entered the steam room, my nose was greeted with the scent of fresh peppermint. It was crowded in there, with a few large middle-aged men sitting with their legs spread. They paused their discussion, looking up for a second.

I spotted a gap in the middle, and instead of turning out of the room defeated like a loser, I took a seat. Nicholas sat down on my right, his thigh rubbing against mine as we both wiggled a bit to gain more space, trying to avoid physical contact with the other spa goers' sweaty skin.

Being squashed up against Nicholas, I had nowhere else to rest my hands but on my thighs. The side of my hand accidentally touched his hand and leg. His skin felt firm and warm.

I'd expected it to be hotter in the steam room, but the seat was almost cool, and the air was still dry, like sitting in a dimly lit mosaic-tiled bathroom. After a minute, the other four people decided to leave – they'd obviously had enough of waiting for the steam.

As soon as they'd left, a hissing noise came from above our heads, and thick white fog started to crawl out from under our seats.

The whole room was ours, yet I didn't change position, and nor did he. We were sitting in silence, both of us looking down or ahead, our thighs still pressed tightly against each other. I inhaled deeply, and the stifling air burned my throat, yet instead of sweat, it was goosebumps spreading across my skin around the area where we were touching.

He was inhaling through his nose, his breathing becoming faster with each intake of air. I could feel his hand tense next to mine, gripping his skin, his fingers bending into a tight fist. My breathing sped up too, and as I squirmed on the tiled bench, my skin rubbed against his even more. I was growing hot from head to toe, and I pressed my thighs together to stop the tingling between my legs. He clenched his fist harder, and I thought I heard him swallow hard.

Suddenly, the glass door made a thudding noise and opened slightly outward. Before the newcomers entered, Nicholas jumped up, pushing the door further out, and left.

What the hell just happened?

*

I rang the bell. Then, when there was no answer, I banged on the door. It had been two weeks since I'd last seen Nicholas. He'd disappeared without a word after our hot and steamy situation, and a few days ago, when even Jules commented that she hadn't seen 'Blondie' in a while, I decided enough was enough. He was supposed to be my guardian angel (well, according to him), yet he was nowhere to be found. Victor was away on a business trip again, and my life had seemed something of a drag the past couple of weeks. Though I still had work and university keeping me busy, I found myself craving some male company.

The door finally opened to reveal Nicholas.

'Is Helen here?' I asked casually.

'She's not up for visitors,' he said expressionlessly.

'Is she alright?'

He hesitated. 'She had a bad fall and needs bed rest.'

I felt silly. I'd convinced myself that he'd stopped following me around for some childish reason, perhaps led by his blindingly strong pride, just like a Mr Darcy. But now it seemed it was me who'd been the prejudiced Elizabeth Bennet.

'So is this why you disappeared?' I asked softly. 'You've been looking after her?'

'She has no other family than…'

I nodded.

There was a cry from the first floor, and Nicholas ran up the stairs, taking them two at a time.

I pushed the door wider and stepped into the hall. I peeked into the living room. Everything seemed the same as when I'd been there in December, except now I noticed there was no TV in the room. There were three more framed photos on the mantelpiece I hadn't seen on my first visit.

The first one was of a baby Luke in a thirty-something Helen's arms; the second was of her again, presumably with her ex-husband and a three- or four-year-old Luke, standing in front of a light-yellow car. My guess had been correct – she had been beautiful in her younger years, and in those pictures

her nose was pretty and straight. The third image was of a late-teenage Luke on a blue-black motorbike, helmet in hand, looking defiantly into the camera, though at first I mistook the bike for a swivel chair.

I heard a door open upstairs and quickly returned to the hallway. Nicholas appeared on the landing, looking surprised to find me still there – or rather having entered the house without an invite.

'Can I help at all? I can go to the shop or do the laundry. Tell me what you need,' I offered.

'It's all taken care of.'

'I see. Well, I'll leave you to it then.'

Helen's weak voice drifted down from upstairs. 'Is that Elizabeth?'

'Yes,' replied Nicholas and went back to her room. I was still in the hall when he came back out. 'She'd like to see you. I told her to rest, but she wouldn't listen…'

'It's okay – I'll come up.'

On the way to Helen's bedroom, I passed Nicholas on the narrow landing, and my arm brushed against his. It reminded me of what had happened in the spa. Before entering her room, I looked at him for a second, and he looked back at me…

That room, just like downstairs, appeared a step back in time. It was a rather crowded space, with an old four-poster bed against the wall and faded floral wallpaper – the kind that was now considered vintage. Helen was sitting up, propped up by pillows. Without make-up, she seemed much more fragile and looked older than the last time I'd seen her – closer to sixty or sixty-five than fifty.

'What a nice surprise,' she said, taking my hand and pulling me closer to her.

I sat on the edge of the bed, trying to avoid her leg, which was raised on a pillow. 'How are you feeling? I hear you had a fall.'

'It was because of that silly cat. Fred had left his ball at the top of the stairs. I wonder what he's up to now…'

I smiled sympathetically. I hadn't seen a cat around the house, but then it wasn't the first time I'd missed noticing something.

'How are you, Elizabeth? It's been a long time…'

'I'm fine, busy as always.'

'It's nice of you to make time to stop by and visit me.' She forced another weak smile then turned towards the door, and I realised Nicholas was still watching us from the doorway. 'Would you mind making us a cup of tea, dear?

'He's great, isn't he,' said Helen when Nicholas had left. 'I mean, of course he is. He's a guardian angel and hasn't moved from my side for two weeks now. I did tell him to visit you… after all, *you're* his mission, not me, but he's not listening to me.

'You see, Luke would never have stayed by my side to take care of me. Don't get me wrong, I miss Luke. He's my son, and no matter what he's done, he always will be, but I'm so grateful that Nicholas has been here. I don't know what I'd have done without him. He's helped me a lot, and I don't just mean around the house – he's helped me understand a lot of things.'

'What things?'

'That sometimes, no matter how hard we try, some people just can't be saved,' she sighed.

I felt sorry for her. She seemed a bit lost and hopeless. I desperately wanted to ask questions like, 'What has your son done?' and 'How exactly did he end up in a fight and a coma?' but I didn't want to pry. In the end, I didn't need to; she went on without prompting.

'Luke was always a bad apple. I tried to convince myself it was because his father left us for another woman and started a new family when Luke was four. After a while, he stopped visiting, and Luke started to resent me.

'I began to get phone calls from the nursery and later the school. And for a while, I tried telling myself that he didn't mean to hurt others, he was like any other child, just a bit naughty, nothing out of the ordinary, nothing to seriously worry about. I didn't want to accept that he'd been born… *different*.

'As the years went by, the misbehaving continued, and we had to keep moving as he just couldn't fit in any school, and the "accidents" around him started to increase. Then, when he finished secondary school, he'd go out with his friends and get into more trouble. He was convicted of attempted burglary and possession of drugs and spent some time in prison. Then, as I told you before, one night after being released, he got into a fight, but his opponent proved stronger, and he ended up in a coma…

'I've always just wanted to be a good mother to him, help him find his path – the way I found mine – but there's only so much a mother can do, and Nicholas helped me finally understand this.'

Her story was sad and moving; I felt she could do with a hug.

'It's alright, my dear,' she said, patting my arm. 'Life doesn't always turn out as we'd like, but everything happens for a reason. God is testing me, but I won't fail Him. I'll show Him that I have endurance, my dear… *Endurance*.'

I looked at her. Her faith seemed blind to me. I couldn't comprehend how she still believed after all she'd been through. She seemed like a good person, and good people shouldn't have to keep proving their worthiness to anyone while the bad got away with truly horrible crimes day after day.

'Can I ask something?'

'Of course, my dear; what is it?'

'Why do you call him Nicholas?'

She smiled. 'I thought it was obvious – he arrived on 6 December. St Nicholas's Day,' she said as Nicholas appeared carrying a tray.

*

As I was leaving the house, I heard pained meowing coming from the tree in front of the house. I thought it must be Fred, the naughty cat. He was running back and forth between the

trunk and the end of a long bough. I sighed; for once, I wished my father was with me. I took pity on the cat and carefully pulled myself up the tree – just high enough to reach where the branch joined the trunk. I'd never climbed a tree before, but it didn't seem that difficult.

'Come here, Fred; come here, kitty kitty,' I said, and the animal hesitantly walked towards me. He jumped on my shoulders, his claws sinking deep in my coat, almost scratching my skin, and for a second, a vision of pink fingernails flashed before me.

I descended the tree slowly, but when I stood on firm ground again, I felt a sharp ache in my ankles. I let the cat go and took a few steps towards the road, but the pain was gone as quickly as it had appeared.

CHAPTER 16

OTHER WORLD

After answering the door, I said, 'Hi,' but Nicholas didn't respond; he just continued to stare at me.

'What?' I prompted.

'You look… different.'

'Bad different or good different?'

'You have make-up on.'

'I always wear make-up.'

'But not this much, and you've done something to your hair. It's all… wavy,' he said, even drawing circles in the air with his finger for illustration purposes, as if I didn't know what wavy meant. I was used to him being quiet, but I'd never seen him lost for words before.

'It's called styling. What's your problem? Why are you here anyway?'

'I came to give you this,' he said, fishing out two folded twenty-pound notes from his back pocket and pushed them into my hand. 'And just thought you'd want to know that Helen is better now.'

'Good to hear; give her my regards. And what's this for?'

'The money you lent me for coffee and stuff. I've had it for a while but never got around to giving it back.'

'It's too much, and anyway where did you get it? Has God started banking on Earth, or did you steal it from Helen's house?'

'Consider it interest. And neither. I earned it,' he said calmly, ignoring my mocking tone.

'You should go. Victor will be here any minute. I don't know what exactly is going on between you two, but it's obvious you don't get along.'

Just as I finished speaking, Victor appeared at the top of the stairs. 'Speak of the devil…' I murmured.

'Hello, gorgeous,' said Victor then kissed my hand. 'And look who's here again? Come for a rematch? But let me warn you, I'm on a winning streak, and you're just setting yourself up for another failure,' he said to Nicholas, laughing kindly.

'We'll see,' Nicholas replied through his teeth.

'Would you excuse us for a second? Why don't you come in and make yourself at home?' I asked Victor, and he obliged. Then I pulled Nicholas away from the front door, down the landing.

'I really don't care why you two dislike each other, or how you know each other,' I said to him, 'but can you please promise me that you'll behave? Victor is my guest, and I know you're easily irritated, but I don't want any outbursts today.'

'It's not me you need to watch.'

'Please.'

'I'll be fine. But I can't speak for him.'

I let Nicholas in the living room too, and both men settled on the sofa with the chessboard on the coffee table in front of them.

'I'll be ready in a few minutes,' I said, waiting for them to acknowledge my announcement before starting the game.

'Don't worry, darling, that's more than enough time to beat your friend again,' said Victor.

Feeling uneasy, I returned to my bedroom, where Martha, Jules' cousin, who was training to be a beautician, had been waiting to apply the last bit of my make-up and carefully place some sparkly silver-blue butterfly pins in my hair. She needed models to practise on, and I didn't have any money to spend on professionals, so it was a mutually beneficial arrangement.

I left the door ajar in case the chess game didn't remain amicable. If needed, I could step in like an impartial referee, though I lacked experience in taming angry men.

'You know what the biggest problem is with your kind?' I heard Nicholas say. 'Your ego. You think no one can change their priorities or raise their game, so you keep using the same tactics each time with everyone. You've become cocky and complacent. You don't even see what's right in front of you, and that's how you'll end up causing your own and your king's demise.'

'Well, one thing has certainly changed: your tongue's grown a lot looser. But if you think you can beat me by trying to distract me with all this chit-chat, you're even more naive than I thought,' replied Victor.

'That's the one thing we can agree on: distraction and deception are your areas of expertise, but that's as far as your skills go I'm afraid – your devil's luck will soon run out.'

'It sounds like you're still upset about last time,' Victor said then clicked his tongue. 'I understand though; no one likes to lose.'

'I won't fail again, but you and your king will.'

'Instead of all this talk, why don't you just worry about your own king? He just sits in the background, unprotected and lazy, watching the other figures running around for him. And look at all the poor little peasants; all they get in return is the promise of death.'

'I'd say it's the promise of revival – you forget about the power of the queen. And my king is well protected, but you can't say the same about yours.'

'Despite what you're saying, I can't see any improvement in your game. You're still too precious about your peasants and the queen.'

'Don't underestimate the peasants… and never… *ever* underestimate the queen. Checkmate.'

'Everything okay?' I asked, returning to the living room.

'Yes, let's go. I let your friend win this. But I've played this game longer than him, and I know that one must pick one's battles,' Victor said, looking at me with a smug smile. Then he turned back to face Nicholas, who'd stood up, ready to leave. 'But, my friend, don't forget, there's always a next time, and

you've only won one battle; you haven't won the war. This was just the warm-up for the final match.'

'Who's the bad loser now?' Nicholas asked with a short burst of sarcastic laughter, and before Victor could even think of a reply, he left.

As Victor and I were coming out of the block, we bumped into Jules.

'Hi, Liz. Oh, girl, you look like Cinderella on her way to the ball. And I take it the knight on your arm is Victor.'

'Hello. It's Julia, right? It's so nice finally meeting you. I've heard so much about you,' said Victor.

'It's Juliana, and likewise,' she said. 'It's nice to finally put a face to the name, *Victor*.' She said his name with such distinct emphasis I was worried she'd jump at him, and I'd witness history repeat itself.

'We're off. See you later,' I said quickly.

'Bye, Julia,' Victor called back as I dragged him to the limousine.

Once we'd settled in the back of the car, I asked, 'Did you do that on purpose?'

'What?' He looked at me with an innocent expression.

'I told you she doesn't like being called Julia.'

'Oh my, did I call her that? I didn't realise. You can't honestly think I'd intentionally try to upset your best friend?'

I hoped not.

'Anyway, I thought you two had met before—'

'What on earth would make you think that?' he asked, sounding shocked, and I almost said, 'Because you'd told me so?' And how else would he have known my dad's address when he came round at Christmas?

But I was looking back into those big dark eyes, and suddenly doubt started to creep into my mind. Perhaps I'd misheard him at Christmas; maybe it was Cora or Colin who'd given him the address. *Why would he lie about it?* Anyway, I didn't want to jump out of a moving car, run back inside the flat, and waste all the effort Martha had put into fixing my hair and make-up.

In the limousine, I learned that our destination was Victor's own residence just outside London. I'd been looking forward to getting a glimpse into his private life, but my enthusiasm had now waned. *Is he really just a rich playboy playing games with me?*

The car passed through a security-protected metal gate onto a gravelled driveway surrounded by well-kept, lush gardens with statues peeking out from behind the hedges and tall plants. In front of the house was a large round area occupied by a working fountain and more stone statues depicting biblical or Greek historical scenes. In the dark, there were special rainbow light effects to emphasise the water feature and tall torch lights planted in the ground to light the gravelled path that looped around the fountain.

Victor helped me out of the car, and I looked up at the house, speechless. It was enormous, with pillars on the front, high windows, and small curved towers with pointed roofs.

The house – or, more appropriately, the mansion – looked magical, like something out of a fairy tale, more like a stately home belonging to the National Trust than something with a private owner. For the first time in my life, I felt like a Jane Austen character, like Elizabeth or Jane Bennet arriving at the Netherfield Ball, or the fairy-tale character Jules had mentioned, only without a curfew and glass slippers to lose.

We were greeted by uniformed servants at the arched wooden double door. Upon entering, it appeared the evening was already in full swing, with us turning up last – but I didn't hear a single comment mentioning the late arrival of the host. Loud orchestral music was playing, and maids were serving champagne and appetisers on small trays. Even after trying them, I couldn't figure out exactly what had just slid down my throat. I'd expected morsels of culinary wonder, but they were all rather tasteless.

Victor confidently made small talk with everyone, his voice drawing the attention of the female crowd like moths to a flame. There were ladies of all ages, but quite a few I recognised as models from the agency. They were wearing short shiny silver and gold evening dresses, their hair and make-up were impeccable, and their posture was straighter than mine, even

when balancing on unimaginably high heels. They seemed to find just the right comments to respond to Victor's anecdotes and laughed at the perfect moment whenever he told a joke. Once again, I felt small compared to them. And I realised the height of my heels was never going to matter – I'd never be able to reach the heights of those women.

When I heard them cackle again, I shivered and reached to pull my jacket tight around me, but I wasn't wearing one. And it felt like the floor was moving under me, giving me motion sickness.

I felt confused and disorientated as Victor's eyes met mine. His smile froze, and his face took on a vexed expression. Excusing himself, he came over to me, which greatly displeased his audience.

'Why don't we get some fresh air?'

I nodded, and he supported me outside onto the terrace. It was a clear, cold night, and I trembled.

He lifted my chin to pull my head to his and kissed me. I shivered again.

'The party will finish late. There are plenty of bedrooms upstairs…' he said, smiling seductively.

I sucked in my lips, tasting the remains of the kiss. *Is he offering me a room or inviting me to share one with him?* My stomach quivered, and I swallowed hard. 'I'm still feeling queasy. Is it okay if I use the bathroom?'

He asked a maid to lead me to the nearest one. It was occupied so I waited outside. There must have been more than one toilet in such a big house, but I didn't want to get lost or climb stairs when feeling dizzy.

Finally, Cora emerged from the bathroom, wiping her lips with her hand. I thought perhaps the exquisite food hadn't quite passed all the quality checks, and I felt lucky to have a strong constitution. She paused upon seeing me and forced a smile.

'What a nice surprise to see you here, Liz,' she exclaimed.

'I came with Victor,' I said quietly.

'I see.'

'I'll probably run into you later.'

'Wait,' she cried, grabbing my wrist. 'Please don't tell anyone about this. It's not what you think…'

In the corridor, a couple of models headed towards us. They were talking and laughing loudly. Cora quickly let my wrist go, and I entered the bathroom.

As I stood in front of the mirror, holding on to the edges of the marble sink, I felt a sudden temptation to smash the glass. The inexplicable urge passed quickly, along with my nausea. However, an unexpected struggle with the side zip of my dress made me stay in the bathroom longer than expected. Also, the silver stilettos I was wearing greatly limited how quickly I was able to return to the other guests. The ties running around my calf and cutting into my skin made me feel like a Roman gladiator in heels. The sandals hurt my feet too, and I wished I could unstrap them and throw them away.

I found Victor once more in the company of other guests. But this time they were older and male. Everyone was listening to a tall, large man with a fleshy nose, dark eyebrows, and white hair. His loud, deep, commanding voice filled the space, and he could have easily passed for an admiral.

'… so my late wife saw this land,' he said, 'and thought what a clever idea it would be to build an orphanage for the "lost-cause children" – as she called them – and employ some Swiss nannies or whatnot to ensure the kids got the best upbringing possible. I was reluctant to give in while she was alive, but after she passed away, I thought, why not? Let's buy it.'

'That's such a touching story,' I said. 'So you built the orphanage?'

He chuckled. 'Of course not. I bought the land, and we're in the middle of building an apartment complex on it; it will have the best views in Richmond. You see, Kimberley was much too sensitive when it came to charity, always throwing money away on the abused or the poor. But there was one thing she was undeniably good at: real estate.'

Everyone started laughing – everyone apart from me.

CHAPTER 17

MAN OF DREAMS

Steve was sitting on the sofa watching TV when I got back from work.

'Where's Jules? I thought you guys were leaving for that weekend trip today. I'm not going mad – it's Friday, isn't it?' I said, then I caught sight of two travel bags in the corner.

'She's gone to the restaurant. Georgios Jr is off sick again, and there's a birthday party today,' he said, keeping his eyes on the screen.

He didn't need to say more. I knew Jules had likely volunteered to take her brother's place, sacrificing the break she'd been talking about for weeks now.

'Have you cancelled the hotel already?'

'It's non-refundable,' he said dismissively, and I took that as, 'No, why bother?'

'Good, then you're going. We'll go and get Jules. I can cover for her in the restaurant. You guys deserve a break.'

'Are you sure, Liz? You don't need to do this…'

'Yes, I'm sure. You guys got everything packed, or do you need me to check?'

'I've packed my bag…' he said tentatively, and I got the hint.

'I'll have a quick look at hers then,' I said. 'Just take yours. If you turn the car around, I'll meet you downstairs in five minutes.'

He didn't argue.

After examining the contents of her bag, I squeezed in some underwear and socks.

When I got into Steve's car, my eyes met Nicholas's. As usual, he was intently watching my every move. He was leaning, arms crossed, against a motorbike I recognised from the photo in the O'Sheas' living room. For a second, I thought about asking him to follow us, but I guessed he would anyway.

Steve's car was a thirteen-year-old modified teal Toyota sports car with a spoiler. I could never get used to travelling in it. When Jules was around, I'd normally squash myself into the back seat, but now I could spread out in the front like I was lounging on a sofa. When Steve turned the key in the ignition, Eminem's 'Without Me' started to play on the radio.

'Where?' he asked, alarmed, looking left and right.

'Huh?'

'You said "danger".'

I had no idea what would have prompted me to do that.

'Nowhere, just ignore me,' I told him, sinking lower into my seat with embarrassment.

I occasionally glanced in the wing mirror, and every now and then, I caught a glimpse of a black helmet and a navy-black motorbike.

Georgios's Taverna was on the other side of Putney, overlooking the Thames. There were no parking spaces left in front of the restaurant, so I told Steve to just drop me off and go around the block, and I'd send Jules out to meet him. Nicholas had pulled up onto the pavement near a tree in front of the restaurant. I walked up to him, and he took off his helmet.

'You're coming with me,' I said to him.

He frowned but let me grab his hand and pull him into the taverna. Jules was surprised to see me and probably even more surprised to see Nicholas, but it took me less than twenty seconds to convince her of my plan. It did take her slightly longer to discuss said plan with her mother in rapid Greek, their hands gesturing almost as quickly as their mouths worked. As I watched them arguing (or conversing – I never really knew). I couldn't help noticing how much they looked alike. Jules was taller but had the same hooked nose and dark eyes, which

seemed part of the family legacy for all Kastro children and even for distant cousins.

Mrs Kastro must have agreed though, as pretty soon she was directing Nicholas to give Antonios and Demetrios (Jules' cousin) a hand in the kitchen. And I took over serving in the restaurant with her. I'd helped out for a couple of summers in my teens, so I knew what I was doing, and apart from the refreshed decor, which was dominated by orange and blue, not much had changed.

As the whole taverna was booked out for a birthday party, we didn't need to take food orders, just replenish a pre-arranged buffet menu.

When most of the food was gone, and the dance floor became busy, a strong hand grabbed me, and despite my protests, I was dragged away to dance with the crowd. I threw my head back to look at the long oak table, and that's when I saw it: a long wooden box being lowered into the ground. I rubbed my eyes and looked back again, but all I could see was the deserted table. The vision of the coffin shook me for a second. Strangely, it felt like a déjà vu, but my mother had been cremated, and I couldn't recall attending any other funerals.

When the party was over, Nicholas was tasked with clearing up the kitchen with Jules' brother and cousin while Mrs Kastro and I wiped down the furniture, mopped the floor, and restored the room's original layout.

'I'm telling you, he's a keeper that boy,' said Mrs Kastro, elbowing me and nodding towards Nicholas.

I gave her a polite smile. There was no point explaining to her that Nicholas wasn't my boyfriend. I'd learned she ignored anything she didn't want to hear.

'You two lovebirds must be starving. Let me make you some dinner.'

It had been hours since I'd eaten, so I had no objection, and I figured it wouldn't hurt Nicholas either.

Mrs Kastro lit a candle in a jar on our table and soon served us a large sharing plate of grilled meats and vegetables, cheese, pitta bread, and olives.

My phone buzzed, and I pulled it out of my jeans pocket. It was Jules; she thanked me again for covering her and said the hotel was amazing. I smiled, folded my phone, and placed it on the table.

As I reached to put some more food on my plate, I accidentally knocked my mobile off my elbow, and it fell under the table. Nicholas got on all fours to look for it.

'Got it,' he said and, still on one knee, handed me the phone – though I didn't see a black phone but a small velvet jewellery box, as if he was proposing to me, and the voices from the kitchen sounded like French rather than Greek. I rubbed my face to get rid of the hallucination – I was just tired and hungry.

I'd expected Nicholas to be overwhelmed by the amount of food in front of him and just to pick at it, but he proved my equal, and within fifteen minutes, we'd finished it all off. We'd left no space for dessert, so Mrs Kastro packed us up some semolina cakes.

When we were about to leave, she said something in Greek to Nicholas, to which he replied with a nod. Both looked in my direction for a second, and a half-smile seemed to play around one corner of his mouth. But I must have imagined it, as a second later, his face was serious again.

'I didn't know you could speak Greek,' I said to him as we left the taverna.

'I told you I could speak any language,' he replied, then he added, offering me his helmet, 'I'll take you home.'

'I was actually going to ask – what's with the motorbike?'

'It's Luke's. Helen found the key the other day in his room; the bike was in the shed. She thought I could make use of it.'

'Do you not need a driving licence?' I asked, but he gave me a hard stare. 'Oh, stupid question!' He must have been using Luke's. I was going mad. He *was* Luke, but I decided to humour him again. 'But where did you learn to ride it?'

'The internet; I watched some videos,' he said in a matter-of-fact way, as if anyone could do the same and learn to drive a car or a motorbike after watching a five-minute tutorial.

'I've never ridden a motorbike before. It doesn't seem very safe… I can just walk.'

'It's a long walk, and it's late,' he said, but I still didn't reach for the helmet. 'Fine, I'll walk you back.' He started to push the bike on the road, keeping pace with me. We were alone on the dark streets, watched only by the moon.

'What did Jules' mum say to you when we were leaving, and why did she wink at you?'

'She offered me a job.' His tone suggested he'd give it no consideration though.

'Was that all? You two were talking for quite a while.'

When he didn't reply, I added, 'You two seemed to get on well.'

'She's a good woman. And you sound jealous.'

'I'm only jealous of her cooking. But if you want, you can keep following her instead of me. It'd be more rewarding for your stomach,' I said, but Nicholas didn't react. 'Anyway, thank you for today.' Again, he stayed quiet so I went on, 'Honestly, it was very nice of you to help out and not argue when I asked you.'

'I can't recall it being a question,' he said flatly, and I blushed. 'Why did you do it?'

'I just thought two pairs of hands would be better than one. Also, Jules is a professional… I'm just an amateur, so technically, I don't even count as one pair of hands.'

'I mean, what made you take her place?'

'She and Steve had plans to go away,' I said. 'It's sort of a late Valentine's weekend and also a late Christmas present for Jules. It's not like I had anything better to do tonight, and she's my best friend. She'd have done the same for me.'

I felt his piercing eyes still searching me, and for the first time, it started to make me uncomfortable and silly, to the point that I felt myself blushing.

'Come on – you're shivering,' he said, taking off his jacket and offering it to me.

I shook my head. I didn't want him to end up in hospital again, but the flat was still a good twenty minutes away on foot. I sighed. 'Fine, I'll ride the bike with you.'

When I got home, it was close to midnight. I badly needed a shower after the long day, and I'd just stripped off my clothes in the bathroom when I heard a knock on the door. I wondered who it could be so late at night and quickly wrapped a large towel around me.

There was no peephole on the door, so it was left to me to determine blind whether it was safe to open it. There was another firmer knock, and I opened the door just as much as the chain allowed me to. My heart was racing, but I'd picked up a long umbrella from the hallway stand to use as a weapon. I peeped out through the narrow gap, and it took me less than a second to recognise the person in dark jeans and a dark leather jacket with folded-down fur collar, yet my heart didn't slow down.

'You left this behind,' Nicholas said, holding up the plastic bag with the food container inside.

'Thanks.' I removed the chain and opened the door wider. He was about to turn and leave when I stopped him. 'Do you want to come in and have tea or coffee with the cake?'

'It's late. You should get some rest.'

His voice sounded softer and deeper than usual, and I could have sworn that when I'd opened the door wider, he'd been measuring me up not as a friend but as a man, his eyes lingering on my bare legs. I wondered whether he'd also checked me out in my one-piece swimsuit in the spa or whether angels were actually asexual – then ridiculed myself for considering the possibility of him being anything other than human.

'I'm too wired up, I think, and I'm not working until twelve tomorrow,' I said. 'Take a seat – watch TV or something. I'll just have a quick shower and will be with you in a minute.'

Instead of a warm shower, I decided to take a cold one to cool me down. Knowing that a man was sitting in the living room waiting for me while I was naked in the bathroom down the hall felt strange and exciting.

When I got out of the shower, I felt compelled to reapply some mascara but decided against it. If Nicolas really was what

he claimed to be, he'd have seen me in a worse state and probably without clothes too.

Suddenly the thought of him staring at my naked body set fire to the area around my groin…

I must be going insane; he can't be an angel. Angels don't exist. And even if they did, they wouldn't take human forms…

With the towel wrapped around me, I slipped into my bedroom to put on some pyjamas. I picked out a T-shirt and joggers. I definitely needed another shopping trip with Jules, this time to expand my nightwear collection.

'Are you okay? You look flushed,' said Nicholas.

'The water was too hot. Or it might still be the zivana,' I replied, though I'd only had one shot of the Cypriot brandy, and that had been a while ago. 'I'll make tea.'

'Sit down. I'll make it,' he said, moving confidently around the kitchen.

'Are you not eating?' I asked, once he'd joined me on the sofa. I was munching on the dessert, but he hadn't even touched his tea.

'I'm fine.'

'I can't eat if you're watching me. One would think you'd had enough of staring at my face by now.'

'Sorry,' he said and turned away. 'I should go now.'

It occurred to me that I'd never asked where he went for the night. I knew he couldn't survive standing under my window till morning. Would he go back to the house in Morden? Or somewhere else? And how much did he sleep? There used to be dark grey circles under his eyes, either due to lack of sleep or malnourishment, but I couldn't see any trace of those circles now. His eyes seemed tired but no worse than mine.

'You can stay here. On the sofa.'

The words slipped out, and before I could take them back, he said, 'Okay.'

'If you want to, you can have a shower. I'll get you a towel.' I jumped up, not giving him time to change his mind about staying.

While he was in the bathroom, I made up the sofa and also got him an extra blanket from the linen cupboard. As I closed the cupboard door in the hallway, I heard the water going, and I resisted the temptation to open the bathroom door and peek at him in the shower.

I left the lights on for him then went to my room, leaving the door ajar.

A few minutes later, the bathroom door opened, and I saw him pass in front of my door on the way to the living room, the grey towel I'd given him wrapped around his waist. I caught the dark reflection of his back in the hallway mirror opposite my door, and noticed his shoulders seemed wider than they had at the spa, when I'd last seen his bare upper body. On his back, there also seemed to be more flesh and the silhouette of some new muscles. The sensation around my groin returned, and I knew it was going to be a long night…

'Goodnight,' I called out to him.

'Goodnight,' he replied, but he paused just beyond my door.

I debated whether I should head to the living room with the excuse of looking for a book to read before bed or to the kitchen for a glass of water – anything to get a better view of his body.

When he still didn't move, I wondered if something similar might have crossed his mind – but just as I was about to kick off the cover, his steps resumed, and the lights went out in the living room.

*

I woke up at half nine, clutching my pillow and panting, and heard myself say a man's name. I found myself in that half-dreaming/half-awake state, trying to hold on to the last fragments of a fascinating dream. I couldn't remember the first part of it, but I'd been dreaming about kissing a man. He had dark blondish hair, darker than Nicholas's, and though his nose seemed slightly too long, it wasn't as prominent as Nicholas's.

And the name rolling off my lips was definitely not Nicholas but Henry Abbott. My dream had ended with a bang that sounded like a gunshot, and that was what had woken me.

After washing my face in the bathroom, I went to the living room, wondering where I'd heard that name before. This was the second time I'd woken up whispering it – if I only counted the times I'd said the full name and not just the first part – but this was the first time I'd heard that gunshot.

I'd almost sat down on the sofa when I noticed a pair of legs and arms hanging off it awkwardly. I'd been so spellbound by the dream that I'd forgotten about Nicholas. His features looked so smooth now, so peaceful and boyish; there was no sign of the man full of anger and cynicism. The towel had been laid on the radiator, and the blanket was slightly twisted around his hips and legs.

I'd been right – it had been a good while before I got to sleep, and I'd kept hearing him moving around on his make-shift bed, perhaps trying to get comfortable.

Quietly, I removed my laptop from its case and opened a new tab on the browser, entering the words 'Henry Abbott Shot' into the search engine. On a hunch, I decided to add 'London' to narrow the search.

I hadn't expected many hits this time, but some newspaper headings popped up after a few seconds. 'Marine dies in shooting,' read the title of the first one, and the rest were similar. The article was short and not much more informative than the headline, but it was dated 13 August 2009.

Twenty-two-year-old Henry Abbott, a marine on leave, was shot to death in an armed robbery that occurred at around 8 p.m. on Friday, 12 August in Tooting.

The CCTV recorded a man in a ski mask enter the shop. He aimed an automatic gun at the cashier and ordered him to open the till. The cashier refused to hand over any money.

Abbott, the only customer in the shop at the time, can be seen on the CCTV footage trying to intervene when the

robber aimed the gun at the cashier. In the struggle that ensued, the marine was fatally shot with one bullet to the chest.

After the shooting, the assailant left the shop empty-handed.

The police would like to ask members of the public to step forward if they have any information about the incident.

The killer has been described as white, around 5 ft 10 ins, of skinny build, with blue eyes.

The shop worker and the Abbott family have declined to comment.

I skimmed through a few more articles, but they didn't offer more information other than Henry Abbott's parents' first names: Judy and Frank, which rang oddly familiar. There didn't seem to be any follow-up articles on the events, suggesting the killer had never been caught. However, a picture of the victim was attached to the fourth article, and my heart skipped a beat as I enlarged the photo.

'No way,' I said to myself and quickly got my art pad out from under the desk. I flicked through the pages until I found the one I was looking for and went back to the laptop. The coloured photo of the young man and the black-and-white face I'd drawn a few weeks ago were no doubt the same man. *Who is this person? And how do I know him?*

Nicholas started making noises, and I quickly folded my laptop and put my pad back under the desk. Kicking off the blanket, he sat up, half asleep, wiping his eyes and yawning. It was too late for me to leave the room; he must have heard me, but I did turn away. However, I'd already seen everything…

He wasn't the first naked man I'd seen, and I was well aware of what often happened to a man's body in the morning, yet I felt like a little girl who'd been caught peeping in the boys' changing room. It hit me that I could have offered him Jules and Steve's bed instead of the hard sofa.

I cleared my throat. 'Good morning,' I said, still with my back to him.

'It's okay. You can turn around now.'

I turned back. He'd pulled the blanket back over himself.

'Do you want me to wash your clothes? I can dry them too.' His clothes were neatly folded on the coffee table, and I picked them up. 'Seriously, it's no trouble. I need to do some washing anyway.'

Before he could protest, I put his clothes in the washing machine with mine from the previous day; they stank of smoke and the scent of grilled meat from the restaurant.

'I need to go to the bathroom,' he said, holding the blanket around him as he stood up. I realised I'd forced him to remain naked for the next hour and a half at least.

The dryer finished at 11.20 a.m., and five minutes later, we were both out of the flat. Nicholas offered to take me on his motorbike, but I declined as I didn't want him to get into trouble. It was one thing riding the bike without a helmet when no one could really see us at night, but daytime was different. In the end, we both ended up walking to my workplace, leaving the bike behind. When I finished at seven, he was already at the entrance waiting to walk me back to the flat.

'Do you not have anywhere else to be?' I asked. 'I mean, I don't mind you being here, but surely you must have something better to do than following me around.'

After spending the night 'together', I thought perhaps he'd overdosed on stalking me. But I could tell by his face I'd upset him again.

'I'm sorry,' I said.

'When are you going to believe me?'

'I'm sorry,' I repeated, not knowing what else to say.

He let out a sigh. 'It's not your fault,' he said, but I didn't understand what he meant. I half expected him to go into a lecture and provoke an argument, but he didn't continue, leaving me wondering whose fault it was that I no longer had faith.

'You can stay over again,' I said. 'Jules and Steve aren't back until tomorrow evening. You can sleep in their room.'

'The sofa is fine.'

'I'll make some dinner, and we can watch a film.'

I made carbonara from the single cream and hard cheese I'd picked up when leaving the store; the rest of the ingredients I already had in the fridge.

'Do you want some wine?' I asked. 'We have an emergency bottle of white and red in the cupboard somewhere.' Jules and I kept the bottles for girly days or in case of failed exams, but we hadn't needed them yet. I ignored Nicholas shaking his head and poured both of us a glass from the bottle of white I'd located in the back of a kitchen cupboard.

'You really need to stop staring at me. I told you: I can't eat like this. Watch the film,' I said. 'It's not like anything can happen to me while you're sitting right next to me.'

He turned his eyes to the adventure film on the screen, but I could still feel him looking at me now and then. Once I'd drunk a couple of mouthfuls of alcohol, he, too, picked up his glass and sniffed the wine before tasting it.

By the time the film was done, so was the bottle.

He took some persuading, but we eventually agreed that he'd shower first, and I'd clean up. I felt lightheaded when I rose from the sofa. Although I didn't need to be up early the following day, I quickly set the alarm on my phone for half eleven – I tended to sleep a lot after drinking, and I didn't want to be late for work.

I'd expected him to reappear in a towel from the bathroom like the night before, but he came back wearing a black T-shirt and boxer shorts. I felt somewhat disappointed.

'Were you not wearing a grey T-shirt?'

'It's a different one,' he said but didn't offer any further explanation. 'You shouldn't get in the bathtub like this. You can't even stand straight; you might slip.'

'I'm fine.'

'No you're not,' he said, and before I knew what was happening, he'd picked me up.

'Hey, what are you doing?'

'I'm putting you to bed.'

'I haven't even brushed my teeth,' I said, but he wasn't listening. He carried me to my bedroom and gently lay me on the bed. He returned a minute later with a glass in his hand.

'Drink this,' he ordered.

'You said I'd already drunk too much,' I tried to say, but my tongue wasn't moving as fast as it should have been.

'It's water. Drink up.'

'Why?'

'Just do it. You'll thank me tomorrow.'

*

'Elizabeth. Elizabeth, it's time to wake up,' prompted a familiar voice.

'Huh?'

'It's quarter to twelve,' said Nicholas. 'You've slept almost twelve hours… Anyway, I'll let you get ready. I'll be in the living room.'

I'd never missed my alarm. My phone was on the bedside table next to me, but it was dead. I'd forgotten to put it on charge.

I got up and went to the bathroom. I realised I was only wearing underwear and a T-shirt; my jeans were gone, but I couldn't remember taking them off.

I showered, washed my teeth twice, and dressed quickly.

'Did you undress me?' I asked him.

'I helped you make yourself more comfortable, yes. How do you feel?'

'I actually feel fine.' He was right about the water – I had no headache at all. 'Was I really that drunk?'

He looked away, so the answer was 'yes'.

'I can't believe I got drunk from some wine.'

'You had almost a whole bottle.'

'No, you had two glasses too.'

'I had one glass; you had the second,' he corrected me, and the memory slowly came back to me.

'You need to eat. I made you breakfast… or brunch.'

On the bistro table, there was a cup of tea and almost a full-on fry-up.

'Where did you get eggs and sausage from?' I asked. I remembered leaving some bacon but had used up all the eggs.

'From the corner shop. Now eat. And before you ask, I've eaten already.'

I sat down and ate more or less everything on the plate. It was good, but not as good as mine and nowhere near as good as Mrs Kastro's breakfast, but I appreciated the effort. I realised he must have cooked for Helen too, while she'd been bedbound.

'Jules and Steve are back today,' I said as we were about to leave the flat.

'I know. You said that yesterday.'

'Thanks for staying with me. I always get scared in an empty flat alone.'

'You were never alone.'

I didn't know what to say to that, and again I couldn't help wondering if it wasn't just me who'd seen his naked body. Had he seen mine too? I quickly chased away the thought of him watching me in an invisible form.

I'm really going mad. No guardian angels are roaming unseen among us! There are no guardian angels – full stop.

CHAPTER 18

REVELATIONS

'What's wrong?' asked Jules, coming into the lounge as I put down the phone. She and Steve had just got back from Hastings, five minutes after I'd got in from university. She'd texted me yesterday that Steve's car had broken down and needed to be looked at by a local garage, so they'd had to extend their stay by one day. When I saw the message, I'd just said goodbye to Nicholas and decided against letting him know I'd be spending another night without my flatmates. But I still wondered what would have happened if he'd slept on the sofa again. *Would he have slept on the sofa?*

'It was my boss – he asked if I could work tomorrow morning as we're short staffed. My colleague, Matty, is in hospital; he tried to kill himself over the weekend – apparently, it wasn't the first time.'

I'd had to say no as I was at university on Tuesdays, but I still felt terrible about letting Ted down.

'He ain't any good at it then, is he?' Steve joked.

'You're horrible, Steve,' said Jules then sat down beside me. 'Are you okay?'

'Yeah, I just don't understand. How could I not have seen this coming?' I asked, more to myself than the others in the room.

'Is it the gay Pakistani chap we're talking about?' asked Steve. 'If I failed at doing something multiple times, I'd be depressed too.'

'Oh, just shut up, Steve,' Jules snapped, throwing a cushion at him. 'Have you not got something else to do? Work?

Washing your car? Band practice? Anything involving you being anywhere but here?'

'I get it, I get it. I'll go and walk the dog,' said Steve, retreating.

'Are you guys okay?' I asked quietly when he'd left. 'I don't want to cause any issues between you two.'

'You mean this?' She waved it away. 'This is nothing. Now, do you want to talk about it?'

I shrugged. 'There's nothing much to say. Every day, I realise how much I've misjudged people. How come I can't see what others do? I'm sure if you'd been working with Matty, you'd have known something was wrong. I can't understand why he did it. Why do people decide to end their life just like that?'

'Come on – don't be so hard on yourself! No one could have known what he was going to do. And I didn't want to say it in front of Steve,' she said quietly, 'because I don't like to feed his ego, but he does have a point. If someone wants to end their life, they will. If someone tries and fails multiple times, that's a cry for help. Some people can't face life on their own; they need others to support them.

'But some people don't understand that; they see things like this as a sign of weakness. My mother, for example. She doesn't appreciate how lucky she and Dad were that they didn't need help when they arrived here; not everyone would have been able to start a business and make it a success.'

'You're right, and your mother *is* strong. Unfortunately, not everyone's mother is like her,' I said, dropping my head. I now felt even more deflated than I had when I was on the phone to Ted.

'Sorry, Liz, you know I didn't mean it like that—'

'It's okay,' I said, lifting her hand off my shoulder and getting up. 'I think I'll have a shower now.'

'Liz, I'm really sorry. I'm sure your mum thought she had a good reason for doing what she did. I'm sure she loved you,' she said, but I wasn't so sure anymore…

'It's fine. Don't worry about it.'

I'd always blamed my father for not stopping my mother, but perhaps no one could have helped her. If Jules and Steve were right, maybe people who were determined to end their lives couldn't be stopped. It was hard to hear, but perhaps Mum had been too weak to face life alone… though she hadn't been alone – she had us. And now my stomach felt tied in knots. *Has my anger been directed at the wrong person all these years?*

When I returned to the living room, Jules was still there, and she looked so guilt-ridden that I decided to share with her what I'd discovered about Henry Abbott, so she'd know it wasn't her I was angry with.

'You must have met in a previous life.'

'You know I don't believe in reincarnation. One life, one death – that's my motto,' I said. 'I don't want to think about being reborn as an ant or some other animal.'

'Then how do you explain this?'

'I've no clue, but it's happening more frequently now. These images of him in my head.'

'Perhaps you two have yet to meet,' she suggested, and I shot her an annoyed look.

'Oh, I forgot he's already dead – or supposed to be.'

'What do you mean "supposed to be"? He's either dead or not. I can't see why someone would make up a story like that.'

'Perhaps he faked his death because he wanted out of the army.'

'Navy. And he didn't need to fake his death. I'm not sure what the military is like in Cyprus, but in the UK, you can leave… eventually, I think.'

'I give up then. I'll let you figure it out.'

The bell rang, and I jumped up to open the door. It seemed our conversation about the dead boy was over anyway.

'Hi, Liz. D'you mind if I come in?'

'Hi, Cora.'

She looked around cautiously then took off her oversized sunglasses as I let her in. She wasn't wearing any make-up, but she was still beautiful.

'Are you alone?'

'Almost,' I said. 'My flatmate is about to leave for work – right, Jules?' I shouted towards the back of the flat.

Jules got the hint, and without any further prompting, she packed her bag and headed out, though it meant she'd arrive unusually early for her shift at the restaurant.

Steve still wasn't back from his walk with the non-existent dog, and I guessed he must have headed to the pub. He was rarely home anyway, maybe an afternoon here and there. Steve was like a Duracell bunny without an off switch. If he wasn't working one of his three jobs, attending band practice, or washing his car, he'd be at a nearby gym or out with his mates.

Steve's busy schedule sometimes made me wonder how much time he and Jules actually managed to spend together, beyond sleeping in the same bed, and whether his moving in had really changed anything about their relationship.

I offered tea to Cora, but she declined. She seemed on edge, nervously fidgeting with her sunglasses.

'Listen, I wanted to talk to you about the other night,' she said.

'It's okay – you don't have to explain.'

'But I want to… How much time have you got?'

'How many weeks are you?' I asked quickly.

'Fifteen.' Her eyes widened in surprise. 'How did you know? Am I showing?'

'No, you still look very thin. It wasn't that hard to put two and two together,' I said, though it had taken me a while.

Despite having read hundreds of mystery books, my sleuthing skills weren't as sharp as I'd have hoped. But there were only three options really: 1) she either had bulimia, 2) most types of food didn't agree with her – which I knew for sure couldn't be the case – or 3) she was pregnant.

I'd also noticed her touching her stomach almost unconsciously – at the Christmas dinner and the photo shoots; Diego had even scolded her for it. The way she clutched her belly reminded me of Claire, a colleague of mine. She'd done the same before her bump had even been showing.

'Is it Colin's?'

She nodded, looking down.

'Does he know?'

She shook her head.

'Does Sarah know?'

She shook her head again. 'Just you.'

'You should tell Sarah.'

'I can't,' she said. 'She and your brother have been trying for a baby since the wedding.'

This was news to me, but I guessed it wasn't something Will would share with me or anyone else. And we barely saw each other now anyway. Perhaps Jules was right about that too, and I should make more effort to see my family. Even if he didn't want to talk to me about them trying for a baby, maybe he needed to see that I'd be there for him, for them.

'Sarah won't care about that; you must know that better than me. She'd be happy for you,' I said. 'Does Colin not want a family? Is that why you kept it a secret?'

'We haven't talked about anything like that yet. No one even knows we're together. It just… happened,' she replied, and I could detect sadness in her tone. 'I don't know what to do.'

'I can't see what the problem is. It was obvious at Christmas that Colin's mad about you. And I take it money isn't really an issue?'

'It's complicated. I just can't have this baby. It wouldn't be fair.'

'You're thinking about abortion?'

'I shouldn't have come,' she said quickly. 'I just thought of all people, you'd understand…'

I found it deeply touching that she thought we shared a connection, perhaps due to both of us having experienced not-so-pleasant teenage years.

'I wish I could help, but I still think you should talk to Sarah or your parents.'

'I'd better go now. Thanks for your time.'

She got up from the sofa, and I saw her out. Her visit left me wondering again why good people always seemed to have it the hardest. Why did they have to struggle so much? My brother wasn't perfect, and I suspected neither was Sarah. Still, they didn't deserve to be unable to afford a home for themselves, and now it sounded like they were having problems starting a family too. It just didn't seem right. The world didn't seem right.

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'It's him again,' Jules said, looking at her phone. 'How does he know my number?'

'I'm not here,' I whispered.

'Maybe you should talk to him.'

'And tell him I'm not here?'

Jules rolled her eyes then took the call.

'Hey, Victor… Yeah, I'm great thanks… No, sorry, you've literally just missed her. She's just gone out… Have you tried calling her?… Oh, you did? Yeah, she must have left her phone at home again. Useless, isn't she… Yeah, will do… Take care… You too. Bye.'

'Thanks, you're such a good liar,' I said.

'Yeah, I should have studied drama and become an actress.' She laughed. 'Now tell me what's wrong.'

'Nothing, I just don't feel like talking to him.'

'What's going on? Why are you avoiding him?'

'I don't know. We're having a good time, I guess.'

'Then what's wrong?'

'Nothing. It's just our dates aren't the sort of thing I'd normally do.'

'And is it a bad thing that he's taking you out of your comfort zone? You're allowed to have a good time with a man without getting serious,' she said encouragingly. 'No one says you have to marry him.'

'You're right. I'm being silly. I mean, it's nice doing something different… It's just that I don't feel like myself when I'm

with Victor. Like I have to bite my tongue. It's just not me. I don't wear stiletto heels, and I don't go to fancy parties. And I mean, come on – he's all Dior and haute couture and me… well, I like finding bargains in charity shops. I honestly don't know what he sees in me. And I wish we could just stay at home once, watch a movie, and I could cook dinner instead of going out. The last two times we went out, I had to eat before the date because I knew the portions we'd get would be minuscule. I can't keep eating two dinners. And the boxes of chocolate he keeps sending me… I never knew that expensive treats could be more fattening than cheap ones. I've put on like ten pounds in the past two months,' I said all in one breath, but I felt much lighter after finally sharing with someone how I felt about him. I decided not to add that he also seemed to be hiding something – perhaps the harem of women Jules had originally suspected.

'Wow, talk about suppressed feelings. Girl, you should tell him how you feel.'

'I thought you didn't like him anyway.'

'It doesn't matter what I think. It's up to you whether you want to spend time with him or not. You don't need my approval to go out with someone.'

'But it matters to me,' I said. 'And he's been so nice to me… I don't want him to think I've just used him.'

'You need to stop thinking like that. Did you ask him to take you to expensive places and buy you expensive clothes?'

I shook my head, recalling how I'd tried to stop him from dragging me into the boutique and how many times I'd said thank you for the dresses.

'Then it's his problem. He's a grown-up. I'm sure he can handle a refusal.'

I looked at her lovingly. Jules had always been there for emotional support, even if what she said didn't always equal what I wanted to hear.

'I hate that you're always right, but I still feel awful,' I said. 'Do you think I should tell him that I'd have preferred sunflowers?'

'I think it's a bit late for that,' she said, looking around the room. There were bunches of yellow and red roses, lilies, and carnations in almost every usable space. I suspected they weren't all in season, but I couldn't even begin to imagine where he'd sourced them over the three weeks since I'd stopped answering his texts and calls.

'We need to get rid of these. What shall we do with them?' I asked.

'They're still fresh; it would be a waste to throw them out,' she said, contemplating.

'I think I've got an idea. Do you think we could borrow Steve's dog-grooming van?'

'I'll ask him if you tell me what you're up to.'

I smiled. I knew she'd get her way with him somehow.

'Let's take the ones that are still fresh to the hospital,' I suggested. 'I think Matty would like them.'

*

'This is you not doing things for others anymore?' asked Nicholas with his arms crossed while Steve and I put the flowers in the van.

'Instead of standing there smirking, why don't you give us a hand?' I replied, using the same mocking tone he had. I didn't need to ask him twice though.

'Hey, mate, good to see you again,' said Steve, and they shook hands.

Once we'd finished loading the van, Steve got behind the wheel, and I sat between him and Nicholas. Jules had to work, so only the boys and I took the delivery to the hospital.

On the way there, Steve tried to make small talk with Nicholas about football and the unpredictable March weather. Nicholas's short answers were polite and demonstrated a good understanding of both subjects. I don't know why, but their conversation made me think of my father.

We didn't have trouble getting past the receptionist this

time. Steve flattered the lady with some smooth talk and put a large bunch of roses on her desk. We were then first directed to the second-floor waiting area.

Matty had been out of intensive care for a few days, and his eyes shone when he spotted us. He acted as if he wasn't even in a hospital room but receiving visitors at his parents' house.

He smiled. 'Oh, Liz, these are beautiful! Thank you, guys,' he said, stretching the last word.

'No worries,' said Steve.

'I think we got enough for the whole unit,' I said, looking around the room. My eyes wandered to the open door, and I saw a young girl walking past down the corridor. She had a Cleopatra-style haircut, and her arm was full of fresh and old razor-blade marks; she must have been a returning guest. But where had I seen those marks before?

She looked at me, opening her eyes wide as if she was shocked to see me. I thought I recognised her from somewhere for a second, but it would have been weird knowing multiple suicidal people being treated in the same hospital unit. *What would it say about me? That I'm a magnet for death?*

Before disappearing down the corridor, she turned back to face me. I could have sworn she'd been trying to say something, her lips forming one word only, and I felt the urge to rush to the ladies' room and throw up.

The word she'd mouthed to me was 'baby'.

CHAPTER 19

GAME OVER

'Victor,' I exclaimed in surprise as I opened the front door. 'I just happened to be in the area and thought I'd pop in to see how you were doing.' Victor seemed like the last person who'd have any business in this neighbourhood, but I let it pass.

'That's really thoughtful of you. I'm fine – busy as always. How are you doing?' I asked, keeping the door ajar enough to not come across as rude.

'I'm good, keeping busy too. Business is good; actually, it's all good,' he said with those huge puppy-dog eyes, which always made my heart ache, and I felt bad for not inviting him in.

'I'm glad you're doing so well. I meant to return your calls, but…'

'You were just too busy, I understand.'

'What's he doing here?' asked Nicholas, appearing beside me.

I'd almost forgotten he was in the flat with me. He'd been occupying the other end of the sofa, reading Goethe's *Faust* in German for the past hour, while I'd been studying.

'Victor just stopped by to say hello,' I said.

Nicholas snorted and crossed his arms.

'I see you're not alone. Perhaps we could talk some other time. I didn't mean to disturb you and your new *boyfriend*,' said Victor dryly.

'He's not my boyfriend.'

'The two of you seem pretty cosy together.'

'Nicholas is just a friend, and it's frankly none of your business. And for the record, you and I were dating for a couple of months, but I wasn't aware we were ever an item. Goodbye, Victor. I wish you all the best.'

I couldn't explain the anger that was suddenly roaming through my blood, making it boil. I was about to close the door when he pushed it open aggressively, causing me to stumble back towards the wall. Luckily, Nicholas was there to steady me.

'You could have hurt her,' he snapped.

'And what are you going to do about it, angel boy? That's right – nothing,' sneered Victor, and Nicholas's jaw tightened. 'It's not in your nature to fight back, is it? I guess the game's over – not much time left anyway to save your girlfriend. In six days, she'll be mine one way or another.'

The next second, Nicholas was all over Victor, driving in a few hard punches from down low, and Victor ended up curled up on the floor. Back in December, the same short-sleeved black top had hung loosely on Nicholas's hollow upper body and bony arms, but now it strained over his defined biceps and broad, muscular shoulders. Perhaps it wasn't even the same top but a size or two bigger. His dark jeans weren't baggy anymore either but almost too tight, and I guessed he was now likely wearing a belt out of habit rather than necessity.

'Where did you learn those moves?' I asked in disbelief.

He shrugged. 'Some guys do kickboxing sessions at the university. I've been watching them.'

'You sure do a lot of waiting around for me. Watch out!' I shouted.

While Nicholas had been turning in my direction, Victor had pulled himself up and started to come at him from behind. He grabbed him and squeezed his neck, and I tried to devise a plan to disarm Victor, but the hallway was narrow, and Nicholas was between us. His pale face was turning red as Victor continued strangling him. Nicholas was coughing and trying to pry Victor's fingers from his neck, but Victor proved stronger.

'You don't want to start a war, do you? Do you?' Nicholas gurgled.

In the dim light of the hallway, Victor's eyes looked coal black and were burning with fire. He looked like a maniac.

Nicholas's grip on Victor's fingers started to loosen, and it seemed like he was only still standing because Victor held him up by the neck. Suddenly, Victor let go of Nicholas, who stumbled then fell forward on all fours, rubbing his throat, coughing and trying to catch his breath.

Victor stayed in the hallway, wiping some dust off the shoulder of his blazer as I helped Nicholas to the sofa.

'It's not over yet – me and you!' Victor said to Nicholas. 'You should never have intervened. You've just broken the rules, and if I find you've gone any further than this, there will be consequences. Then I *will* start a war. And as for you, *Lizzie*' – he said my name with disgust – 'I'll see you in six days to finish our business.'

He strode out, not even bothering to shut the door.

I grabbed Nicholas a glass of water from the kitchen, and he gulped it down. I closed the door before sitting next to him.

'That was crazy!' I said. 'Are you okay? Your throat looks really red. You should get yourself checked out,' I added, putting my hand on his arm.

He nodded, placing the empty glass on the coffee table.

'I should have asked sooner, but how do you know him? You guys seem to go way back.'

'One could say we move in similar circles,' he said, but somehow, it was hard to picture Nicholas in the world of fashion. When it came to clothes, he only seemed to know four colours: white, grey, black, and blue, and none of the ones he wore showed any sense of high fashion. His mother didn't come across as a secret heiress either, so I doubted he and Victor could have anything in common – apart from me.

'What was he talking about? What business do he and I have?' I asked.

'He's right. I shouldn't be discussing this with you,' he said, staring off into space.

'If this is about me, then I have a right to know. Tell me!'

'Do you believe me now?'

'What? I don't understand.'

'Do you believe I'm an angel?' he asked, looking straight into my eyes and putting a hand on mine.

At first, I couldn't interpret the expression on his face, but when he wouldn't take his eyes off me, I was filled with fear for the first time, despite his soul-warming touch.

'Please don't start that nonsense again,' I said, pulling my hand away.

'Do you or do you not believe me? I need to know. Otherwise, there's no point in talking about Victor any further.'

I tried not to look at him because I was afraid I was going mad myself, but since no one else could hear us, I decided to tell him the truth.

'Yes, I believe you,' I whispered.

There it was, out in the open, and I couldn't think of a time when I'd felt more vulnerable and confused. My whole world had turned upside down when Nicholas entered my life. The boundaries of reason seemed to have broken down, and his story, which had previously seemed implausible and ridiculous, started to swallow me up.

'Victor is a demon,' he said, speaking each word slowly to give me time to process the information. He was watching my reaction, but my silence prompted him to continue. 'Almost a year ago, you made a deal with him. Don't even try to ask; I can't tell you what his part of the agreement was – I'm already walking on thin ice here. But the bottom line is you offered your soul in exchange for his services. In six days, he'll try to make you keep your end of the bargain.'

As his words sank in, I felt the rug pulled out from under me. If I believed Nicholas was what he said he was, I had no reason to doubt what he'd told me about Victor was true.

'How can I not remember this? That I made such a deal

with a… with a…?' I couldn't bring myself to say 'demon'.

'I can't tell you. I'm sorry,' he said.

I sat there feeling numb and lightheaded, watching him, but he wouldn't look at me now. Then I remembered something.

'When I went out with Victor in January, and you two were talking, I heard you say that you weren't here to stop him. You didn't mean stopping him from going out with me, did you?' I asked, but his silence spoke for him again, so I continued, 'You're not here to save me from *him*, are you?'

He still didn't speak, keeping his head down.

'You mean, in six days, I'm going to die, and he'll come to take my soul to Hell?' I asked quietly. 'What am I going to do?' My eyes started to fill with tears, and he put one arm around me. *How can I be so afraid of something I've never thought could be possible?*

'I'm sorry.'

The room started spinning around me, and I couldn't breathe. I was going to die. I was going to die before turning twenty-two… In six days… *My family – how am I going to tell Will and Sarah that in less than a week, they'll never see me again? Jules – how can I look into her eyes and say goodbye forever?* My mind was like a rollercoaster trying to plan for the unthinkable.

Study notes and books were scattered across the table in the living room, and I realised I'd been wasting precious time. There were so many things I'd wanted to do in my life, like eat pizza in Rome and see the Northern Lights on a cruise to Norway, and I'd been saving hard for those. But what was the point of having money in the bank if I could never spend it? And even if I jumped on a plane now, how would I ever enjoy myself knowing that the memories wouldn't last more than a few days?

'Then why are you here?' I shouted, fighting my tears and pulling away from him. 'What can be so important that He sent you here?'

'I can't tell you. I'm sorry.'

'Are you? All of a sudden, you've got feelings?' I asked, and I hated him. I hated myself. I hated that I couldn't even

remember what could have been so important that I'd sacrifice my life for it. 'Just go away. *Go*! And leave me alone.'

'Elizabeth…'

'Don't touch me! I don't want you here! *Understand*? Go back where you came from!'

When I heard the door shut, I leaned forward and laid my head on my arms on the coffee table and let the tears flow. Crying seemed to be the only appropriate course of action, but after an hour of sobbing, I forced myself to stop, before Jules came home to find me with running make-up and puffed-up eyes and started asking questions I had no answers to.

I decided to have a bath to wash off the leftover mascara and the burden of my thoughts.

The water was so hot it made my skin look like a lobster's, but I thought I'd better start getting used to boiling. After all, that's what I had to look forward to in Hell.

As the last remaining drops left the tap, drawing small circles on the surface, a feeling started to come over me, replacing the cold dread in my heart. It was a sensation that had become increasingly frequent over the past six months or so, like a pre-warning to déjà vu. Then it changed to despair, but it wasn't the kind I felt at my own prospects. It was despair over someone else's, as if I'd been mourning someone else's fate…

CHAPTER 20
LIGHTING THE FIRE

'What's that?' Jules asked, standing at the window and pointing at a small white-grey pillow-like shape with a red stain in the centre, lying on the ground in front of the block's entrance.

'I'm leaving now; I'll let you know,' I said, heading for the door. If I was going to pretend everything was fine, I'd have to go to work and university as usual. I didn't want to raise Jules' suspicions by staying at home and wallowing in self-pity.

My stomach twisted when I got downstairs. And when I moved closer to the 'pillow', I almost fainted. It was a pigeon, its heart ripped out and feathers scattered like breadcrumbs all the way to the block entrance. A crow appeared and started dipping its beak into the wound.

I called Jules on my phone. 'It's a dead pigeon,' I reported.

'Yuck.'

'Can you get Steve to get rid of it?'

'Sure.'

'Thanks, speak later.'

But the following day, the pigeon was still there.

'Hey, Steve, didn't Jules ask you to get rid of a dead bird yesterday?' I asked as he came out of their bedroom.

'Yes, I did. I put it in the bin.'

'Are you sure? There's one down there again.'

'You're kidding, right? Must be a fox roaming around. My mate's mum once complained that a fox kept killing their hens in Hackney. I'm telling you: London's not a safe place for birds.'

I was going to comment that London wasn't a safe place full stop, but I was in a rush again, so I just asked him to get rid of the new pigeon too.

'That's three days in a row now,' I said to Jules the next day.

'What?'

'Another dead pigeon. Can you get rid of it please?'

'*Me*? I'm not touching *that*,' she said with disgust. It appeared our friendship didn't cover the discreet disposal of slaughtered animals, but I couldn't blame her.

Steve wasn't around, so I decided to get rid of it myself. It seemed no one else in the building was bothered by the bloody sight. I put on rubber gloves and, holding the bird away from me, tried to figure out which coloured wheelie bin I should use to dispose of the feathery body.

Unable to decide, in the end, I just shoved what was left of the bird under some bushes down the road.

Nicholas hadn't shown for three days now, but I knew (I hoped) he wasn't very far away. Then, on the fourth day, when I walked downstairs, instead of a dead pigeon, I found him at the entrance. Maybe the two things, his reappearance and the sudden lack of slaughter, weren't coincidental; perhaps Victor was connected somehow. Maybe it had been a warning for me, some sort of bloody countdown until my final meeting with the demon…

The thought filled me with terror.

'Hi,' I said.

'Hi,' Nicholas replied, and with no mention of what had happened between us a few days ago, he resumed his place as my constant shadow.

We rode his motorbike together again to work and university – a few weeks earlier he'd bought me my own helmet, a yellow one – and I realised I'd really missed Nicholas being around; the supposed last days of my life had seemed even more tedious and depressing without fighting with him, and no matter how angry he could get or how upset he could make me, I found his presence reassuring, even in the shadow of death.

We didn't talk about our falling-out the next day either. I thought he'd likely been watching me anyway over the past days without me knowing – he was good at being invisible when he wanted to be, and I was good at being blind.

'You'll figure out something, trust me. You don't have to be afraid,' he told me.

'You don't have to do this,' I said again. 'You don't have to stay with me and wait until… you know.'

This time my words sounded harsher than I meant them to.

'Right now, I'm not here because I have to be. I'm here because I want to be.'

He put a hand on my shoulder, smiling encouragingly. I studied his face, waiting for the tiniest muscle to twitch, but he didn't even bat an eyelid. His eyes kept searching me, and my body was overcome with that pleasant sense of warmth again.

We'd been sitting on the sofa for hours now. It was nearly dinner time, but neither of us made any mention of food. I'd called in sick at work in the morning and even managed to convince Jules that I hadn't been feeling too well. I must have looked the part because she didn't comment other than to say she hoped I'd be better by the time she and Steve got back from Ireland. (I hadn't told her I likely wouldn't be here by then.) The only thing she'd found odd was the big hug I'd given her before she'd left the flat.

They'd gone to Dublin to share the news of the engagement with his family in person. He'd proposed in the spa hotel near Hastings, but she'd only told me about it a few days ago, as she hadn't wanted to mention it when I'd just heard about Matty's suicide attempt. Of course, I might have figured it out for myself, but I hadn't noticed the white-gold princess-cut-diamond ring on her finger. It turned out Steve hadn't been saving to promote his band but to ask the question Jules had been waiting for ever since they'd become serious.

'I'm not afraid of… *dying*.' I said the last word to feign strength. 'Not anymore. But now that it's only a matter of hours, I can't help wondering how my silly life is going to end.

Am I going to have a slow and painful death? Or is it just going to take a couple of seconds, and I'm not going to feel anything at all?'

Nicholas was silent. He wasn't going to feed me false hope. I gulped.

'You know what?' I said, still putting on a brave face. 'It doesn't even matter anymore. I already know the outcome. My soul will end up in Hell. But it's true that I'm not scared of the idea of death or eternal damnation anymore. I'm only bothered that I'll die knowing that my whole life has been in vain, meaningless.'

'No human life is purposeless or meaningless. Every human being is unique, and so are their lives.'

'I haven't been a very nice person. I'm full of anger, and I know better how to hate than to love.'

'You *are* a nice person.'

'You don't understand,' I protested. 'I've never done anything remarkable or noble – at least nothing for which I might be remembered.'

'One doesn't have to act like a hero or do something glorious to be remembered. You'll always be remembered by those who love you. And there are many who love you.'

'How can you suddenly speak so highly of humans? You don't even *like* us.'

'I don't have to like you. I have to serve you. I have to do what He tells me to do.'

I considered his words for a minute.

'You really think I'm leaving something behind? That people will remember I was here?' I asked hopefully.

'I'm absolutely sure of that.'

This time he didn't even need to touch me. My soul was already melting from the tender way he looked at me. I smiled and thanked him.

'You don't need to thank me. I'm just doing my job.'

'Yeah, I almost forgot. You know, you sound just like a policeman: *serve and protect*. I guess the only difference between

you and them is that you don't have a truncheon, and you don't have to wear that ridiculous bobby hat.'

He smiled – the first proper smile I'd ever seen on his face. And I realised I couldn't stop talking nonsense even in my final hours (if these were indeed my last ones). But this was the first time I'd ever seen him relaxed. His face had always been so serious, set as he was keeping his distance from everyone.

'A minute ago, you were sulking, and now you're making jokes and smiling.'

'Emotional rollercoaster, yes, I know. Sorry, not sure what the proper behaviour is when facing death. Perhaps you can tell me about it. You must have seen a lot of people in their final hours.'

'I'd rather not.'

I took his hand in mine, and we sat in silence for a while.

'How long have you been watching me? I mean from above or wherever it is you normally are.'

'Always.'

For the first time, I believed him without any hesitation.

I smiled. 'You know, I kind of enjoy your company.'

'I kind of enjoy your company too,' he said, and I leaned my head on his shoulder.

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I rang the bell; I'd expected a maid to appear, but Victor himself opened the wide and heavy double door.

'Well, well, what a nice surprise,' he said, smiling. 'I was just about to pay you a visit.'

'Why wait? Why not settle this now?' I asked, waiting for my stomach to twist, but it didn't. I was ready to die.

'Come in then.' He led me through the circular-shaped hall, down a few steps, and into a study which was almost the size of the library at the university. It was decorated in Victorian style, dominated by dark leather and expensive carved mahogany furniture. The tall bookcases that ran around the far end of

the room formed a U-shape, holding ancient-looking leather-bound books, the colour scheme alternating between dark shades of red and green. A few reading lamps placed around the room and some burning logs in an old fireplace gave an eerie feeling to the commanding paintings on the wall.

The dark, mainly black-and-white pictures reminded me of the ones in the Serpentine Gallery, except their subject matter wasn't pornography but madness. They portrayed laughing clown-like creatures and blurry, distorted forms of ghostlike faces and other enlarged, disfigured objects; they all seemed to be lesser-known paintings. Still, they affected me in the same mind-bending and stomach-turning way as Munch's masterpiece *The Scream*, which wasn't an example of Surrealism but from an earlier art movement.

When learning about Munch in secondary school, not being able to tell whether the artist had tried to depict a screaming person or a person hearing a scream had always given me a headache, and if I'd spent any more time trying to analyse the picture, I'd have gone mad… Standing in Victor's study, I felt the same way about the obscurity of the images on his walls.

'I'm not afraid of you,' I said quietly. 'Go on – kill me.'

'Oh, darling, that's so sweet, but the truth is everyone is afraid of me, even my own kind. But considering you willingly came here, to show how generous I am, I'll allow you to do it yourself. You still have some time left though – take a seat,' Victor said, gesturing towards a massive desk.

I settled in an armchair in front of it. Behind the desk, in a corner, a grandfather clock was ticking away lazily.

To show how generous I am… I could have sworn I'd heard that sentence from his lips before.

'Just tell me why… Why did I turn to you? What made me sell my soul to you?' Not that it mattered too much at this point.

'I thought you might ask,' he said then walked to a tall carved filing cabinet; he returned with a long rolled-up sheet of thick yellowish paper. 'Here's the agreement you signed – I'll be back shortly.'

I unrolled the parchment and started reading. There was no doubt the crimson handwriting was mine.

I, Elizabeth Jane Maynard, born 23 March 1989, wish that I and Henry John Abbott, born 11 November 1986, had never met.

That name again: Henry Abbott. The marine who'd died in a robbery. Who was this person to me? Why would I have sold my soul so I never met him?

As I stared at my signature at the bottom, the veins on my right hand started pulsating, the pain almost unbearable. I looked at my wrist and saw the strange scar Sarah had noticed at Christmas – three little snails tightly following each other. I let go of the paper and turned my arm ninety degrees. The snails took the shape of three sixes.

Behind my arm, I saw the grandfather clock. Its glass reflected the flames of the open fireplace with a bluish hue. I froze, and my eyes wouldn't move from the flickering lights.

*

'Which one?' asks Henry.

'You decide,' I say, looking between the DVDs in his hands. 'I'll get the ice cream.'

'*Independence Day* then.'

'I thought you wanted to watch *Indiana Jones*.'

'But you don't.'

'I didn't say that.'

'So you *do* want to watch *Indiana Jones*?'

'Do you think he's a good actor?' I ask, entering the kitchen area, which shares the same space as the small lounge. 'I mean, he's never won an Oscar. Of course, he's had more action roles than dramatic one. Still, he's had such a long career. One would think—'

'Who are you talking about?'

'Harrison Ford of course,' I say, looking at him over the short countertop. *How can he not know who I'm talking about?*

'Definitely *Independence Day* then,' he says to himself, and I hear him squeezing back the other case among the DVDs on the shelf.

'Oh nooo!' I exclaim, and he rushes into the kitchen, looking at me with concern.

'What happened? Are you alright?'

'We haven't got ice cream,' I say, closing the freezer door.

'I thought you'd hurt yourself.'

'I do fancy some ice cream.'

'Are you saying I should go to the shop and get some?'

'That's not what I said.'

Henry looks at me, tilting his head to one side, waiting, then shrugs and returns to the lounge. With the TV and DVD controls in his hand, he settles on the sofa, and I cuddle up to him under the blanket.

'It would be so nice to have some ice cream…' I murmur as the DVD menu appears on the screen. 'Can you please go to the shop and get some?'

He laughs. 'I knew it. I'm not an idiot. What flavour?'

'Vanilla.'

'You don't even like vanilla.'

'But you do. I thought I'd give it a try.'

He puts his hand on my forehead.

'What are you doing?'

'Just checking if you're ill.'

'I'm fine,' I say, pushing his hand off me.

'Okay, but if I buy it, you have to eat it.'

'I will.'

'Yeah, yeah,' he sighs as he gets up.

I swear I can hear him mutter the word 'women' while he slips into his trainers.

'Wait,' I shout before he opens the front door.

I rush to him and kiss his lips. 'You're the best,' I say.

'Whatever.'

'I love you.'

'I love you too.'

'Why do you love me?'

He shrugs. 'Something to do, I guess,' he says, and I gently elbow him in the belly. 'I'll get a mint chocolate chip one too, just in case…' he adds.

'Almost forgot the popcorn…'

'Anything else?' he asks. 'Why don't you just write me a list?'

'Just ice cream and popcorn and maybe some Coke. And hurry please.'

'Yes, boss.'

I return to the sofa and cover myself again with the blanket, trying to suppress a yawn. When I open my eyes, the screen has gone dark. I'd fallen asleep.

'Henry?'

The question echoes back from the walls in the darkness, but there's no other answer. I grab the remote control to check the time on the TV. It's 11 p.m. I kick off the blanket and look in the bathroom, but there's no sign of him. My stomach trembles. I return to the living room for my phone and dial his number. It rings out. I try again, but this time it only goes to voicemail. Then I notice the flashing blue lights reflected in the window. On the corner of the street, a group of people form a semicircle around two police cars and an ambulance.

I put on my shoes and grab my keys. My heart is racing as I rush down the stairs.

'Can you please tell me what happened?' I ask a woman in the crowd – like the others, she's stretching her neck to see what's going on in the shop.

'They say there's been a robbery, and someone got shot,' she says.

As I elbow my way through to the yellow tape, I feel the blood drain from my face.

'Back up, back up. Miss, you too.' The police officer grabs my arm and tries to push me back behind the tape.

'Please – my fiancé, sir,' I say to him. I struggle to find the

words, as if I'm using a foreign language. 'He went to the shop a couple of hours ago… He hasn't come home… I'm looking for him… Henry Abbott.'

As the last words leave my lips, I catch a glimpse of the person lying face down on the floor in front of the counter through the glass door. Short waves of curly blond hair dipped in a pool of blood. The world starts spinning, and the ground slips from under my feet—

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Victor took the seat behind the desk.

'I—' I dropped my head, unable to speak, tears gathering in my eyes. As I'd waited for him to return to the study, everything had come back. Recalling our agreement at the wedding, at first, I'd wished I could run to Henry and see how he was doing, just to hear his voice one more time. Then I remembered the newspaper article and I realised the deal, leaving my life with Henry behind… it had all been for nothing. I'd ended up exactly where I'd been a year ago. No, it was worse. My pain was unspeakable – I'd lost Henry not once but twice.

'Shhh,' he said, holding up his right index finger while keeping his eyes on the gold watch on his wrist. 'And… time is up now,' he announced.

The gong from the grandfather clock sounded twelve times behind him, and together we watched the pendulum swing back and forth.

When the echoes faded, he turned back to me. 'Sorry about that. What were you saying?'

I looked at him, boiling with anger. 'You promised he'd be alive. You've broken your word. The deal's off.'

He laughed. 'I don't believe that's what you asked for.'

'But I remember him now. I remember everything – our life together. These images in my head feel so real! They *are* memories, aren't they? But how can I remember if Henry and I never met?'

I was silent for a minute, my thoughts rushing faster than ever, and then it hit me. 'You didn't rewrite the past… you never brought him back to life… is that it? What have you done then? Did you just brainwash me – and everyone else – to forget about us ever being together?'

'Clever girl. Perhaps I did underestimate you,' he said. 'Now then, what's it going to be?'

'But there's no deal. You can't take my soul. I bet you regret giving me a year when you could have taken my soul at my brother's wedding.'

He laughed and laughed, then he laughed louder, like a maniac.

'What's so funny?'

'I don't have to take your soul; you'll want to give it to me freely. To make it easy on you, I've laid out some options for you. I can't believe how nice I am.'

He gestured to the desk, where a gun, a coiled rope, and a small plastic bottle with pills sat waiting. How had I not noticed them before? Or had they just appeared?

'I figured you weren't the razor-blade type,' he said and smiled knowingly.

'What makes you think I'd end my life now?'

He got up, walked around the desk, and stopped behind me. He put his hands on my shoulders, and my body tensed.

'But, darling, you've just said you remembered everything. Surely then you remember the pain you felt upon seeing your love lifeless on the cold hard floor. You must remember Henry lying in his own blood, that dark pool of blood oozing from the wound in his chest… As if it was yesterday, right? And you must remember that he'd still be alive if you hadn't sent him to the shop. Because it was you who sent him there. It all happened because of you… He died because of you.

'Just imagine the terrible pain and endless suffering his parents have had to endure. Don't you remember his mother's heartbreaking cries? And the lifeless look on his father's face? I know you do. Those voices and images will never leave you; they'll stay with you and torture you till the very end…

'And what about the pain you caused Henry's brother? Little Timothy, losing his only brother, the brother he looked up to so much? Can't you feel his tears burning your cheeks? And what about Henry's friends? Remember the looks on their faces at the funeral? You could barely recognise them after what *you* put them through. You'll never be able to forget them.

'Remember the nightmares choking you, the sleepless nights, tossing and turning in bed, wishing you were dead like Henry? Do you really want to live through that again?'

I dropped my head. Hearing Henry's name was like being stabbed in the heart, Victor twisting the knife into me over and over again. And he was right; they'd all suffered from Henry's passing. Each one of them…

As I sat there, all those pained, pale faces and voices came back to me. He was right – they were burned in my mind forever. But they weren't the only things. In that dark hour, something else had become clear to me.

'Now then, what's it going to be?' he asked.

'So this is how you do it with everyone…? You get people to end their lives for you?'

'Believe it or not, quite a few decide to end their lives before their time is up. Nothing to complain about really; it's like Christmas has come early.'

'And all because of *you*… You drive them insane; you push them over the edge!'

'How dare you accuse me of such? I never even touch them!' He laughed. 'So have you made up your mind yet? Rope or revolver, or would you rather try the pills again? You never know, maybe second time lucky…' He laughed again, but it was becoming nervous laughter now, and the urgency in his tone showed that he was growing impatient.

I leaned forward and picked up the gun. I'd never held one, and it was heavier than I'd expected.

'Good choice, fast and easy. It's an automatic – you just need to press that button, and it's all over,' he said, his fingers squeezing my shoulders harder. 'Just remember *the baby*;

remember the pain you felt when you learned that your last connection with Henry was gone too. That you had nothing left of him.'

I felt another stabbing pain in my chest, and tears rolled down my cheek. I lifted the gun, pointing it at my temple…

But then I heard another voice. It was Nicholas, as clear as if he'd been standing right next to me. '… *there are many who love you*.' Images of Jules, my brother, Sarah, Ted and others appeared before my eyes – even Nicholas himself, their smiling faces looking at me…

Then I recalled what Jules had said about people who tried to kill themselves, that they couldn't face being on their own and how her mother thought suicide was 'a sign of weakness'. *Is it really? But how can I face life without Henry?*

My fingers were still clenched around the gun, pressing it against my skin. I closed my eyes; I wanted to get those happy faces that were encouraging me to stay out of my head.

But, instead, the image of another person appeared before me. It was my mother.

My grip on the gun loosened. I felt more tears running down on my face.

How could I do to my family what Mum had done to us? How could I leave everyone behind, making them forever wonder why I'd done so? How could I cause any more pain to them? Maybe I'd never learn why she'd killed herself… But what good reason could she have had to leave us behind? Had she thought we'd be better off without her? That we would be happier? Her passing had only brought misery to my family… *How can I ever be like her?*

I wiped my eyes.

'No,' I said, putting the gun back on the table.

'No what?'

'You can't make me do this. I'm not doing this. If I die, it still won't change anything – Henry still isn't coming back.' I took a deep breath. 'My father once said – and he was right – that all actions have consequences, and this is one I'll just have

to live with.' I wasn't yet sure how I would live with it, but I got up. 'I'm leaving.'

'Hold on – not so fast. You can't think I'll let you off that easily,' he said, pushing me back down on the seat. Then he walked back behind his desk, sat back in his swivel chair, and looked down at me.

'So what now? You've all but admitted the agreement wasn't valid – you can't touch me. If you kill me now, you won't get anything out of it. At this point, only suicide can send me straight to Hell.'

He touched the tips of his spread-out fingers together, not looking at me, then pressed his index fingers against his lips, deep in thought. When he finally spoke, his voice was cold.

'There are so many other things I can use to destroy you that you'll wish you'd just ended your life when you had the option.'

'What do you mean?'

'You'll know soon.'

'Tell me now.'

He looked at me, narrowing his eyes. They were on fire, glowing red.

'There will always be people important to you…'

'I'm not making another deal with you.'

'Who's talking about you?'

I processed his words with horror.

'Leave my family alone!'

'Who says it will be a family member? Who says it will be a friend? Who says it will be another love of yours?' he asked mockingly, smirking.

'I'll warn them about you.'

'Is that your plan? To tell everyone you know not to sell their soul to a demon like you did?'

I bit my lower lip. He was right. Just take Helen; for a long time, even I'd thought she was a madwoman for talking about guardian angels. *Who in their right mind would believe me?*

'I can see you've now considered the feasibility of that,' he continued and smiled. 'Don't worry, darling; we'll meet again.

Whether in a month, a year, or ten years, you know the saying: *revenge is best served cold*. Time isn't a concern for me; I have plenty of that – unlike you… Our game isn't over yet.'

I recalled the chess games between him and Nicholas then, and the words they'd exchanged suddenly took on a new meaning.

'Don't underestimate the peasants,' I said.

'What did you say?'

'You heard me. Your king will fall. Sooner or later, your king will fall.'

He laughed. 'You're not in a position to threaten me. I think you forget who you're talking to.'

'I'm not threatening you,' I said. 'Just repeating what Nicholas told you, and he never lies.'

I took off the watch he'd given me and put it on the table next to the gun. 'And you can keep your time.'

CHAPTER 21
REVISITING THE PAST

I tried to seem composed and forced myself not to run until the front door shut behind me, but my heart was racing, my breathing uneven. I didn't want Victor to see how much I was shaking inside.

I hurried down the path, and when I reached the electric gates, they opened at once. Victor must still have been watching me; I wasn't sure, though, whether it was via a camera or some supernatural power. Nicholas was still outside the gate where he'd dropped me off, and he didn't seem at all surprised to see me alive, though there was an expression on his face that suggested relief.

'You're still here,' I said more to myself than to him.

'You okay?'

'Let's just go. I don't want to talk about it.'

Once I'd got on his motorbike, I glanced back at the grey stone mansion towering in the distance. It had looked inviting and stately on the evening of the ball, just over a month ago, but now it looked like a ghostly gothic castle where the statues had turned into scary gargoyles. And I realised it reminded me of the titular building in *House on Haunted Hill*, my brother's favourite classic horror movie, which he'd once forced me to watch bits of.

When we parked up at the block, it was almost half two in the morning, and I still didn't feel like talking. It would have taken too long to tell him everything, and first, I had to form a coherent story in my head to be able to put it into words later.

We agreed to talk about what had happened the following day. He offered to stay over, but I declined – I wanted to be alone with my thoughts.

By the time I'd had a shower and gone to bed, it was after three. It was difficult to fall asleep. But if I wanted to keep my job at the supermarket, I had to make sure I could get up and make an appearance; I couldn't call in sick again. Although I only slept two hours in the end – I kept thinking of Henry and reliving my past with him – I had no trouble getting up on time. Nicholas couldn't have slept much more than me, yet he was waiting outside, ready to give me a lift.

After work, instead of going home, I asked him to take me to my dad's house. I needed to ask him something, and my thirst for the answer kept growing; I didn't want to leave my visit for another day.

I found him alone in the house, and he was taken aback that it was him I'd come to talk with, rather than Sarah or Will. I decided not to beat around the bush and just ask what was on my mind.

'Dad, why did you marry Mum? I mean, why her?'

His face showed genuine surprise at my question. 'Because I loved her.'

'No, I mean, what made you fall in love with her?' I asked, studying his face as if seeing it for the first time. It looked more weather-beaten than I remembered; he still had a moustache and a short beard, though it seemed more neatly trimmed than the last time I'd properly looked at him, years ago.

'What was so special about her?' I pressed on. In the past few months, I'd learned that my mother had never been a good cook, nor did I owe my life to her after what had happened in Scotland. I thought perhaps my other good memories of her might also be unreliable.

'Not sure if I've ever told you this,' he said. 'I met your mum in a pub on New Year's Eve in 1982. Still seems like it was yesterday. I was waiting at the bar to order a round for me and my mates. Then, somewhere behind me, I heard the most

charming laughter – I had to find out who it was. I can still see her standing there in that dark-green dress. Your mother was the most beautiful creature I'd ever seen. I knew straight away she was the one for me.'

'So was it only her looks?'

'No, of course not. She was kind, gentle, and generous. She could walk into a room and light up the place with a smile. You're just like her.'

As he talked, he looked into my eyes, and for the first time in years, I didn't look away. There was a pained expression on his face. He'd just told me how much I looked like Mum, yet I realised it was his eyes I'd inherited.

'I'm not like her,' I protested.

'Not everything. But your hair, your face are just like hers. And there's a lot of things you do the way she used to.'

'Like what?'

He hesitated for a second.

'The way you laugh, the way you walk, the way you wrinkle your nose when you're upset, the way you bite your lips when you're thinking, the way you stir your tea twice left, twice right…'

'Is that the reason you never look at me? Because I remind you of her? I always thought you hated me.'

'Hated you? No, never. I'm sorry if I made you feel that way. The truth is I hated myself because I couldn't make her happy. Because you and Will had to grow up without a mother—'

'It wasn't your fault,' I said, much to my surprise. 'Mum had two children, for God's sake. Why weren't we enough to make her stay, to make her happy?'

'Please don't be so hard on her,' he begged. 'She loved you both very much.'

'Then why did she kill herself?'

He turned away, but not before I'd caught a glimpse of tears gathering in his eyes. I'd never seen him cry – apart from at my mother's funeral.

'Sorry, I didn't mean to upset you. Forget it.'

'I don't want you to be angry with her. I wish I could offer you an explanation for why she did what she did. I've been thinking about it ever since, and it kills me that I still don't know the answer. But after my accident, something changed in her… No idea why, but she kept saying it was her fault. She became distant and depressed. I tried to get her medical help, but she didn't want to see a doctor. I was afraid to leave her alone, so I stayed at home to look after her. But I couldn't be with her every minute… I wish I'd been there to stop her when she decided to take those pills… By the time I found her it was too late; the doctors could do nothing…' he said, then added quietly, 'But I haven't been the best father either. And if I hadn't gone to the shop with you that day… that accident would never have happened, and… perhaps your mum would still be with us. I just hope you can forgive me one day – I still don't understand where that yellow car came from…'

'Mum's death wasn't your fault,' I said again. 'Dad, can I ask you something else too?

'Sure, as long as you don't work yourself up again.'

I promised him I wouldn't.

'Let's say someone close to me, a friend of mine, died.' I hesitated before I went on. 'Would you come to their funeral?'

He narrowed his eyes. 'Is everything okay with Jules?'

'She's fine. I'm only speaking hypothetically.'

'That's a really strange question, Liz.'

'Dad, just answer it please.'

'Then I guess I would.' He hesitated. 'If you wanted me to…'

'So let's say I really wanted you to be there. But for some reason, you didn't show up. What would have kept you away?'

'Erm… I honestly can't think of a reason.'

'There must be something!'

'Well… maybe. So, hypothetically of course, you say this person is very close to you, right?' he asked, still eyeing me suspiciously. 'And it would be really painful for you to lose them?'

I nodded impatiently.

'Okay, that answers it,' he sighed, relieved, as if he'd passed a test.

'What? What answers it?'

There was a long silence before he finally replied, as if he felt ashamed for what he was about to share with me.

'I wouldn't go to that person's funeral because I couldn't bear to see my only daughter being in so much pain again.'

It was the first time I'd hugged my father in the past twelve or thirteen years.

CHAPTER 22
TORTURED

'I still don't get it. Why the whole charade? Why go to all this trouble?' I said. Nicholas and I were sitting together on the sofa after he'd brought me back from my father's house. He'd made us tea, and we were both sipping it. 'Why did he take me out on dates?'

'Distraction. They enjoy games.'

I deduced that by 'they', Nicholas meant demons, as if I might balk at the word. I remembered I'd had trouble saying 'guardian angel' when I'd first met Nicholas, but that had been for different reasons.

'Distraction from what?' I asked.

'You were starting to remember too much. Victor must have been worried it would all come back to you, and then the deal would be off – it was a risky game for him.'

'Well, technically, there never was a deal. He never kept his word. I guess his speech wouldn't have had the same effect on me if I'd remembered sooner. If I'd had time to think… But if he's really a demon, I don't know… he could have just manipulated others to try and date me or distract me, as you said. Oh, wait, I think he tried that. I remember just before you appeared, seven guys had tried to chat me up or ask me out in the space of a week. Even Jules found it odd.' It made me wonder whether Victor was behind Jules' constant matchmaking attempts too.

'But you didn't go for them.'

I shrugged. 'Something just felt off about them; frankly, in most cases, I realised too late that they'd been trying to flirt

with me.' At the time, it just hadn't occurred to me that they really fancied me. I'd dated guys but hadn't much practice reading between the lines or recognising the signs that someone liked me. 'But I guess they were never really interested in me; it was all just make-believe.'

'Hence Victor took it upon himself to be obvious enough for you.'

'Which he was. Unfortunately, I just missed the part where he wasn't interested in me romantically but more in a lethal way. To be honest, I'm quite disappointed in myself; I can't believe I fell for it.'

At least I hadn't fallen for him. The thought of feeling that way for someone only interested in the 'afterlife me' was more than creepy.

'It would have been more surprising if you didn't.'

'But I still don't understand why he didn't bring Henry back to life.'

'Can't you see it still?' he asked as if I was a child missing the obvious. 'Because he can't bring back the dead. No one but God can. His kind use deception to trick people; alter their memories like in your case, and they can influence you, so you ask them for what they intend you to ask for. Because if you ask for something they can't provide, there's no deal. You were slightly different; it's not often that someone just wants a fresh start to their ordinary human life, not fame or fortune. He saw an opportunity with you and grabbed it. And, of course, there's usually a catch.'

'A catch?'

'A caveat of some sort,' he said. 'Like, if someone asks to be cured of a terminal illness, then a week later, they're diagnosed with a different kind. Or someone asks for a ton of money, and they win the lottery, but then they lose all the money gambling a month later. One way or another, they end up worse off. It depends, of course, on which demon you deal with.'

I gulped. Even though Nicholas kept saying 'they' and 'them', it hadn't occurred to me that there could be multiple Victors out there, fishing for fresh souls, deceiving innocent, unknowing

people. But were we innocent if we were willingly allowing, inviting, and seeking out these dark powers to take over our souls, and letting the demons play mind games with us?

Many of us denied the existence of God for most of our lives, yet readily accepted the existence of the Devil just because his servants knocked on our doors, offering what we desired most. And most of us accepted their offers without hesitation, forgetting about the good God had done for us. And He had done good without asking, without expecting anything in return. But we only ever remembered the bad and blamed Him for everything that brought us pain.

'Thanks for the advice, though it would have come in handy last year,' I said.

'There's another thing too that you keep forgetting.'

'What's that?'

'I've told you before that one chooses the path, but one can't change the end of one's journey. The how and the when can't be changed.'

I thought for a minute. 'Are you saying that Henry would have been shot whether he met me or not?'

He nodded, not looking at me.

'I know I have to somehow, but I still don't know how I can carry on now that I remember. I still miss him,' I said, trying to fight the tears I thought had long been conquered.

But actually, I wasn't sure what I felt. So much had happened since he'd died that it seemed like our romance had in fact been a different life, and I also had memories of a life without him, one that was clearly fake but still felt real to me.

But what is real anymore?

I licked my lips, and the salty taste there made me remember the pain I'd felt on seeing Henry dead. Like yesterday at Victor's, the numbness once again returned to my soul and started spreading all over me.

'I remember everything. I wanted to be dead; I tried to kill myself, but I just couldn't go through with it – well, I almost managed once…'

'Carrying on with life and facing up to the challenges that drive you to the edge takes more courage than ending your life does,' he said. 'You're stronger than you think.'

'How can you say that? Look at me: I'm weeping like a baby.'

I got up, walked across to the kitchen, and buried my face in my hands.

'Being strong doesn't always mean holding back the tears and suppressing how you feel. Shedding tears can also be a way of letting go.'

What's he trying to imply? Is he saying I'm ready to let go of Henry?

I looked up, and he was already beside me, ready to embrace me.

'I hated my father for such a long time for letting my mother go,' I said. 'But it wasn't his fault; she'd decided to leave two young kids and a husband behind. And why? Maybe I'll never know, but I don't want to follow her example. She didn't even give us a chance to stop her. I can't believe I almost did the same back then. At the time it did feel like I had no one to live for.'

'You just need to live for yourself. Appreciate the time you've been given to spend here. Live life to the fullest and don't change for anyone. You're a good person,' he said, caressing my hair.

For a second, I thought I heard him sniff my hair, but that couldn't be right – he wasn't the sentimental type.

He then looked at me, sliding his arms around my waist, and said, 'And you're still young. You'll meet someone else.'

'I just want Henry back. He was my everything,' I said, gripping his arms.

But hearing myself say the words out loud, I wasn't sure whether they rang true anymore. 'He died because I fancied ice cream. *How insane is that?* In our reality, I stopped him from joining the navy because I was afraid something might happen to him while he was at sea. But all it took was for me to send him to the corner shop and—'

'It wasn't your fault. His time was up.'

I pushed him away. 'So how can you say we have free will if it's already written when we're to die?'

'You're still not listening. I'll say it again: you choose the path; you choose the journey that gets you there. God doesn't intervene in how you travel the road. His love allows you to make your own choices.'

'So when is my time up? You must have known all along that I wouldn't die yesterday, yet you let me believe…'

'Only God knows the *when*.'

'You're saying you didn't know? So why are you here? What's the purpose of you following me around like a sad little puppy? Because it wasn't to save me from Victor—'

I remembered how my last conversation with my father had ended.

'Was it to make up with my dad? Was it so I'd forgive him?'

He shook his head lightly, and suddenly it all became crystal clear.

'Oh, I see it now. This whole conversation was leading up to it, wasn't it? You came to save me from myself, so I'd forgive myself for Henry's death?'

'I've already said too much. And it doesn't seem like I've achieved what I came for.'

'Hmm… perhaps He sent you here for another reason too.'

He looked at me, puzzled.

'You've changed,' I said. 'A lot. Three months ago, you were so cynical and hated all humans; you didn't care about any of us one bit. Don't get me wrong, you're still cynical, but you do seem to care about me now.'

'That's my duty. I have to.'

'There it was – I saw it. You twitched.'

'You just imagined it.'

'And again! You're lying! You're even lying to yourself, and you know it.' I stepped closer, watching his face. 'You like me. You really like me! I knew it! Since that day in the spa…'

He looked at me, and his gaze was intense, his eyes almost as dark as Victor's had been yesterday, and for a second, I wasn't

sure who the person in front of me was. Then he grabbed me and pressed his lips against mine, his tongue thrusting into my mouth. I returned the kiss without thinking, just as greedy.

He pushed me hard against the wall, one hand still behind my head, gripping my hair, then pulling out the loose rubber band that had kept the neat ponytail in place and tossing it on the floor. His other hand moved down my back to my waist, making me tense and straighten up, so his firm chest was pressing against mine. My nipples hardened, almost poking through the thin material of my top. My tears had long dried on my burning cheeks, and I realised I was standing on my tiptoes, barely touching the floor, almost as if I was pinned to the wall, his strong arms holding me up.

My hands were ruffling through his hair, pulling his face against mine even harder – if that was possible – my short nails digging into the skin at the back of his head, but he didn't even flinch.

He lifted me easily onto the bistro table. It wobbled under my weight, but I couldn't care less, even if it broke. His warm tongue was still battling mine, and I leaned towards him, my hands running over his chest, pushing the leather jacket off his shoulders and arms. My fingers wandered to his belt, undoing the buckle and opening the top button on his jeans.

But before I could open the zip, he put one palm on my eager fingers and pushed my hands off his trousers. Our lips abruptly parted, and he stepped back, looking deep into my eyes, his irises even darker than a few minutes ago, burning with desire. We faced each other, not moving, like chess opponents in a check situation, both of us still out of breath.

He then sucked in his lower lip and ran his still trembling hand through his hair. Then he lifted me off the table and picked up his jacket from the floor.

Still panting, unable to speak, I watched him leave the room. Then the front door shut loudly behind him.

'What the—? No, this is not over yet,' I said, shaking off my daze. I quickly put on my shoes and ran after him.

I caught him as he was putting on his helmet, already sat on his motorbike.

'You can't do this to me. You can't just run away like this.'

'Go back inside.'

'Where are you going? I thought you were supposed to be my guardian angel, always looking out for me, always being around,' I said angrily. 'And now you're off?'

'I have to go.'

'You're lying.'

'I can't stay.'

'Come back,' I asked more quietly, almost begging, grabbing his hand. 'Come back with me – please. I don't want to be alone.'

'You don't want me; you still want him.'

'What's Henry got to do with this?'

'You're still in love with him. You're still mourning.'

'It's not about love…' *Or is it?* 'Come back with me.'

'I can't do this. It's not right. It's not fair.'

'Stop saying that. Don't you see I need you? That I want you? I want *you*.'

The moment he finally gave in, a teal Toyota sports car pulled up in the street.

Great, I thought. G*od really doesn't want Nicholas and me to have fun*. The walls in the flat were paper-thin. Not that it bothered my flatmates, but it bothered me. And surely Jules would want to tell me all about their trip to Ireland. It would have been rude of me to say, 'Hi and bye – we're off to have sex now.'

Nicholas must have read the frustration on my face and quickly said, 'Get on.'

Pretending not to notice their arrival, we rode off towards Central London. I hadn't frequented the area we eventually stopped at, but based on the five-star hotel's name, we were near St Pancras.

'I don't think they rent rooms for one night here.' I felt like Julia Roberts's character in *Pretty Woman* again. Sure enough, I

didn't fit in with the smart-looking crowd sitting on the expensive cream sofas in the lobby.

'Please don't; it's embarrassing. Let's just go,' I begged, pulling on his jacket.

'Wait here,' he told me again, and I obediently stopped a few yards from the intricately carved mahogany front desk while he walked confidently up to the receptionist.

The hotel decor reminded me slightly of Victor's study, but this space was flooded with light, and no expense had been spared on chandeliers. I couldn't hear the exchange between Nicholas and the young receptionist, but from afar, it seemed like an amicable conversation, as if they knew each other well. My face burned when Nicholas looked in my direction, and I dropped my head. My eyes stayed focused on the marble floor, my reddening reflection staring back at me from the polished surface, until Nicholas joined me with a key card in his hand and led the way to the lift.

'Why did you bring me here? Surely we could have just gone to a budget chain. And do you know that pretty brunette at the check-in? Who is she?' I kept bombarding him with questions – quietly, so as not to be overheard by the elegant hotel guests – but he didn't say a word until we reached a door on the fourth floor.

'You deserve better than a cheap hotel,' he said, looking at me with tenderness in his eyes. His words surprised me and filled me with some warm fuzzy feeling – I didn't know what to say.

He slid the card into the reader on the door, and my jaw dropped as we entered, words failing me again. Off the bright hallway opened the bathroom – which was the size of an average living room – and the floor was of the same colour marble as the hotel lobby. The hallway led onto a seating area, and behind it was a queen-sized bed with a load of embellished golden pillows. Everything else was in light pastel colours. I was positive that the room's footprint was larger than the entire flat I shared with Jules and Steve.

'You must be hungry,' he said. 'There's a restaurant on the ground floor.'

'I can't go down there like this,' I said, looking down at my jeans and blue-and-white-striped top, 'and I have nothing to change into.'

'You look fine. You could wear a sack and still be the best-looking woman in any room.'

'Did you just compliment me?'

'I did.'

'You've really changed,' I said in disbelief. 'How come you didn't twitch though?'

'Because it's the truth. Can you not see what effect you have on the men around you? Whenever you step into a room, all eyes are glued to you.'

'That's not true.'

'Then how come I'm not "twitching"? I can't lie without being punished, remember?'

I didn't reply, but he went on. 'You really don't understand how beautiful you are. Not just on the outside but on the inside too.'

'Why are you being so nice to me all of a sudden?'

'I guess because I don't have much time left with you here.'

His eyes were clouded by an emotion I'd never seen in them. *Sadness?*

'When do you have to leave?'

'He's already impatient; He's been calling me back.'

'Can't you stay a little longer?'

'It's not up to me.'

'So how long do we have?'

'Tonight really.'

'And you were about to leave without saying goodbye?' I asked, and my anger almost overtook my lust for him. 'How could you do that to me?'

'Because saying goodbye seemed harder—'

'You once said – or actually, you said it multiple times – that you can't feel,' I reminded him.

'I'm not supposed to… Not like humans.'

'But you do feel now, don't you?'

He didn't need to reply; the look in his eyes said it all.

'Then stay.'

'I just said I can't. I wish I could…'

I nodded sympathetically and said, 'But we still have tonight.'

'We still have tonight.'

I kissed him lightly on the lips, and I could have sworn I tasted the tiniest hint of salt.

'Let's get room service. Let's not waste time going down to the restaurant,' I said. 'You order, and I'll have a bath. Maybe you can join me while we wait. We really shouldn't waste any more time.'

'What do you want to eat?'

'Do you still need to ask? I thought you knew me better than anyone else in the whole wide world,' I teased him, and he smiled.

'I do.'

'Just give me five minutes before you follow me.'

'Not sure I can wait that long,' he said with a sad cheeky smile.

The bathtub was enormous, so after washing off my make-up, I filled it with warm water and, using the complimentary toiletries, generated a million bubbles.

Once I was lying in the water, the doorknob turned slowly, and he came in wearing nothing but boxer shorts.

'What did you order?'

'You'll have to wait and see,' he said smugly.

'When did you become such an annoying smarty-pants?' I asked. 'Talking of pants, I don't think you need those in the bath.'

He stepped closer, and I leaned out to slide the tight shorts off him. His thighs were even firmer than when I'd last seen them, when he'd slept over at the flat.

I pulled up my legs to give him more space – though there was plenty in the tub – and he climbed in and settled at the opposite end. We gazed into each other's faces, barely

breathing, not making a move, as if waiting to see who'd take the first step, our upper bodies not covered by any bubbles. I was conscious that my hardened nipples were also staring at him, but he ignored the invitation.

Of course, it was he who took control. With a sudden move, he grabbed my right foot and lifted it, making me lie back in the water with my head resting on the back edge of the tub. He rubbed my foot gently, leaning forward, his hands moving up my calf until he reached my knee. He repeated the massage on my other leg then started to wash my right foot, again moving his hands towards my knee – but this time going past the joint, his hands on my thigh, heading for my groin.

I let out a moan. Instead of attempting to reach the top of my thigh though, he repeated the same process on my other leg. I didn't want him to stop, but once again he took his hands off me before reaching the area radiating heat to all the other parts of my body.

Then he kneeled up and grabbed me, and before I knew what was happening, he'd pulled me closer, turning me so I was sitting between his legs, my back against his chest. He pushed me slightly forward then started washing my neck and shoulders, slowly moving his hand towards my waist, under the water. He wouldn't go past my waistline though. He pulled me closer again so my back was pressing against his chest. His nipples were as hard as mine.

Under the bubbles, I felt he was ready to take me, but he was still preoccupied with caressing my body and covering it with a soft layer of creamy lather. His hands were on my stomach, ever so slowly heading for the area between my breasts, but his hands slid down again without reaching higher.

'Why are you doing this to me?' I asked.

'I know how important foreplay is to you.'

'There's foreplay and torture, and this is now the worst kind of medieval torture.'

'You like it,' he whispered in my ear, and his warm breath on my neck made me crave him even more.

His fingers then wandered up in a straight line on either side of my core, lightly brushing against the side of my breasts, then slowly sliding back down. I bit my lip hard, throwing my head back.

I tensed and burrowed my shoulder deeper against his chest. The water temperature had dropped slightly, but his usually cool skin felt hot, like mine. It wasn't just my skin that was on fire; I was burning inside too, the flame still spreading from my groin, shooting up into my bust and making my toes tremble.

There was a knock on the door.

'Food's here,' he said, gently pushing me away so he could climb out of the tub.

'You can't leave me here like this; we haven't even washed you.'

'It's enough for now. Let's eat. We'll carry on later.' Nicholas smiled, wrapping a towel around his waist and leaving the bathroom.

CHAPTER 23
THE ENDING

I was lying on my side in his arms, cuddling up to him, my head buried in his chest, where I'd been, enjoying the warmth of his body, for the past half hour or so. But now I lifted my head to watch him, memorising the features I was well aware weren't his. I knew whenever I thought of him, it would be this face I'd be longing for. He was looking back at me with an unusual tenderness in his eyes.

He'd kept his word earlier, and after eating, we'd gone back to the bathroom to finish what we'd started. Then we'd played a similar game on the sofa, then on the floor between the sofa and the bed, before finally making use of the bed. I recalled Helen talking about 'endurance' and smiled – it had suddenly gained a whole new meaning. I didn't think Nicholas understood the reason for my smile, but he smiled back – though maybe he did understand, who knows?

'I think I'm ready to be conquered again.'

'Already?'

'Well, it's almost six o'clock,' I said. 'I don't think there's any point in trying to sleep now.'

'Let's just stay like this for a minute.'

'Have you run out of steam?'

'I just like watching you.'

'I think you forget that you'll still be able to see me, and it's me who won't be able to see you.'

He was silent; his expression didn't change, but he softly ran his fingers over my face.

'Do you really know everything about me?' I asked.

'Yes.'

'Okay, let's play a game then. What's my favourite book?'

'*Anne of Green Gables*.'

'That was an easy one. What's my favourite colour?'

'It's yellow and sometimes blue.'

'No, it's purple.'

'Not sure why you're still adamant about convincing yourself it's purple. You've owned only two things in your life so far that were purple, but the first thing you put on your wall in the flat was a sunflower painting by Van Gogh and a landscape titled *Blinded by the Sun*, and you generally wear yellow and blue tones.'

'Whatever,' I said, defeated. 'What's my favourite film?'

'*Pretty Woman*.'

'No, it's *Forrest Gump*.'

'No, it's *Pretty Woman*. You've seen it at least fourteen times and at least twice within the past six months.'

'It's still *Forrest Gump*,' I insisted. I didn't want to admit defeat again.

'No. I'm not sure why, but you seem to think that by denying what you love or who you really are, you'll please others and live up to their expectations – whatever you think those expectations may be. What difference does it make to anyone what colour or film you prefer? And who cares at all what others think of you? You're better than most of them.'

It was difficult to argue back about something I couldn't quite put into words, even for myself. But *Forrest Gump* had won six Oscars, *Pretty Woman* none.

'*Fine*,' I said. 'First kiss?'

'With Ethan Hopkins, when you were five, in his parents' garage.'

'It was a shed.'

'Garage,' he repeated. 'But five-year-olds' memories aren't the best – not your fault.'

'First real kiss?'

'I'd like to say it was me, but…'

I realised I shouldn't have asked, as my question made the smile vanish from his face. Again, counting to five would have been useful. In my fake life, it had been Billy Craig in year eleven, but in my real life…

'Tell me something about yourself. Something I don't know,' I asked quickly.

He was silent for a minute, then said, 'I translate.'

'What?'

'I translate foreign research papers into English. That's what I've been doing to earn money,' he explained. 'It was you who gave me the idea.'

I looked at him, puzzled.

'Yes, when you were trying to make me speak Mongolian like a performing monkey.'

'I'm sorry.' I hadn't realised my teasing had hurt him. No matter how much he'd tried to deny it, I'd known from the start that he did have feelings. And apparently quite an abundance of them too.

'Then you didn't want me to follow you to classes and sent me to sit in the library all day. That's where it started. A student saw me reading something in Arabic and offered me money to help him translate a medical article for him. Then his friends got word of what I'd done, and more students approached me, and then it just sort of became a business. That's how I met the receptionist. She is, or was, a law student at the university; she's graduated now. I helped her with her dissertation. She told me about where she worked and said if I ever needed to stay a night in Central London, she'd be happy to sort a room for me. She felt she owed me one because I'd done the job for free…'

'Because she was pretty?'

'No,' he said, 'because her father had just died.'

'Oh.' For an angel, Nicholas had always seemed quite heartless and cynical, yet he was going around helping others, like Helen and now this girl, who hadn't been allocated to him by God. Who knew how many other humans he'd helped while

trying to look after me? I began to think I'd greatly misjudged him. A pattern was emerging: my initial instinct and final verdict on someone's character were at opposite ends of the spectrum. I thought about all the men I'd written off after meeting them only once…

'No one is as pretty as you are,' he said, as if making sure I wasn't (still) jealous.

'Tell me something about me that no one could possibly know,' I asked. 'Something that doesn't relate to material objects or things anyone close to me would know.'

He was quiet for a few moments.

'There's this one thing, but I don't want to hurt you by bringing it up.'

'It's okay – just say it.'

'You sure?' He was looking at me with concern in his eyes, but it just raised my curiosity.

'Yes.'

He was chewing on his lips, still pondering whether to share it with me, then he took a deep breath and started speaking very softly. 'Juliana was wrong. You'd learned you were pregnant before your brother found you drugged and half-unconscious in your flat.'

Nicholas was right. When Henry had died, and I'd seen him lying in his own blood on the floor, I'd collapsed and fainted, so I'd been taken to the hospital for a check-up. I wasn't sure how, but the doctor who'd been looking after me had discovered I was expecting and told me I was perhaps five or six weeks into the pregnancy. I hadn't shared this with anyone – it had stayed between me and the doctor. And now I felt even worse, even more selfish, that I'd been trying to end not just my life but that of my unborn child too. Well, they'd died anyway.

'What you said about our path before… you know, that the ending and the "when" is written – does that apply to a foetus?' I asked, and he nodded, hugging me even tighter as my eyes filled with tears.

CHAPTER 24
NOT SAYING GOODBYE

'Do you really have to go?' I asked for the hundredth time, squeezing his hand. We'd found a quiet corner in the hospital car park. Nicholas, unable to keep himself upright, had to lie down, his head resting on my lap. 'Can't you just stay a couple more days? I never thought I'd say this, but I'll miss you.' I smiled weakly.

'I'm only leaving this body, not you.'

'It won't be the same. And if I can't see you, don't you dare watch me in the shower. If I can't have any fun, neither should you.'

He tried to laugh, but it sounded more like coughing.

'Thank you,' I said.

'For what?'

'For saving me.'

'I didn't.'

'Why would He be calling you back otherwise?' He had saved me, though not the way I'd expected. 'Promise me something please. Promise me you'll come back… one day. You know, before I'm all wrinkled and grey.'

'I'll try. I promise,' he said.

I was waiting for a muscle to move, but his face remained impassive – he wasn't lying. 'Good.'

His throat became stiff now and he straightened his head, staring up with wide eyes.

'It's time. You're ready?'

I nodded.

'Close your eyes.'

'Why?'

'Please, Elizabeth, just do it.'

Even with my eyes shut, I could sense the warm light emitting from his body. It lasted only a few seconds though. When I opened my eyes, only an empty shell remained in my arms.

As I smoothed down his hair, I realised we hadn't even said goodbye. But it was too late to think about that. I had to focus. Nicholas had trusted me, and I still had a task to complete. I gently let the body roll to the ground and rushed into the hospital reception area.

After ensuring Luke was in good hands, I'd still have to sort the motorbike we'd left at the hotel; I'd have to get it back to Helen later. Nicholas had been feeling so weak by the time we'd checked out that he was no longer able to ride the bike, so we'd had to take a cab.

'Help, somebody, please help me,' I shouted a couple of times, out of breath as the automatic doors closed behind me.

Almost immediately, a middle-aged nurse appeared next to me, asking what was wrong. I explained that my friend hadn't been feeling very well, and just as we'd arrived at the hospital, he'd lost consciousness.

The nurse nodded sympathetically and gave some instructions to the receptionist, and less than two minutes after Nicholas had left, Luke's body was rolled into the hospital with an air mask on.

Although the hospital team managed to get his heart pumping again, I knew he wasn't expected to wake up anytime soon. But this body could still do a great service if Nicholas kept his word and decided to visit me in human form again. I hoped he would. And I had no reason to think he'd break his promise to me, because in this mad and hostile world full of evil, whose words could I trust if not an angel's?

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Eva Sparrow is a UK-based writer who formerly lived in London but currently resides near the British coast with her significant other and their two mischievous little boys. When she isn't straining her eyes in front of her laptop, slaving away in her day job as a surveyor, or writing romance and genre-bending fiction by night (or feeding her always-hungry family with delicious home-cooked meals), she enjoys travelling and exploring other cultures (meeting lots of quirky strangers along the way) for more inspiration to build her diverse characters.

Keep up with Eva's latest news and releases at evasparrow.com.